

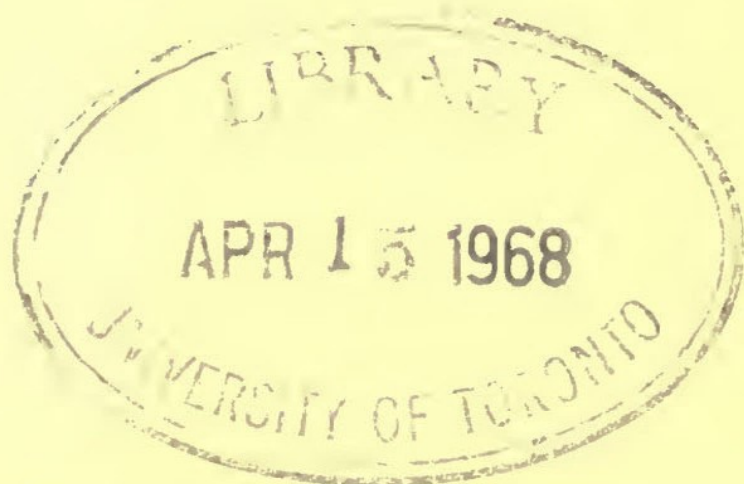
EXPLOITS of ASAF KHAN

BY
AFGHAN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
SIR GEORGE YOUNGHUSBAND,
K.C.M.G.



HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
3 YORK STREET LONDON S.W.1



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HOW ASAF KHAN ARRIVED

BY

HERBERT JENKINS

THERE are times in the life of a publisher when the tragedy of being a publisher is relieved to some extent by a manuscript that causes him to take off his telephone-receivers—to the detriment of his business and the relief of his staff.

In my room are two telephones and two doors, each with a key upon the inside. Such precautions are as necessary to a publisher as a second means of entry—or egress.

After reading a few pages of the manuscript of the "Exploits of Asaf Khan," I removed the telephone-receivers and locked both doors—I desired to be alone.

Having finished the manuscript, I rang up the literary agent from whom I had received it, and inquired if I were the first to whom it had been submitted. I was curious to account for its travel-stained appearance.

I was the ninth! Eight times had the "Exploits of Asaf Khan" been weighed and found wanting. I

can almost see some tired pen writing ; “ But why not have made the ninth Levite, Mr. Jenkins ? ” I replaced my telephone-receivers, unlocked my doors and, knowing more about Authors than Afridis, I dictated the following letter to Sir George Young-husband :—

DEAR YOUNGHUSBAND,—

I have had a manuscript offered to me of rather an unusual nature. It is entitled “ Exploits of Asaf Khan,” and gives some incidents from the life of a thoroughly lawless ruffian ; but rather an attractive fellow.

You know the North-West Frontier, and it has struck me that you might be persuaded to write a foreword giving the book a send-off, that is, of course, if you like it.

I have not yet discussed terms with the author’s agent, and before doing so I wondered if you would glance over the manuscript and let me know what you think.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) HERBERT JENKINS.

The reply came with refreshing promptness. It read :—

“ DEAR JENKINS,—

“ I think this story absolutely top-hole and true to life as a tick. I have met ‘ Asaf Khan ’ and his like hundreds of times, and the life described is exactly his. I don’t know who the author is, but he must have lived long on that Frontier and must have been in either the Political Department or the Police, I should say.

“ I am sure the book will be a great success. It will be absolutely new to 99 out of 100, and will give folks at home some idea of the people who live on our borders. I lived 36 years on that Frontier, 30 with my regiment, and 6 commanding a brigade ; and any day during those 36 years one might meet a knife or a bullet. But one got accustomed to it !

“ I have written a sort of introduction, to which you are welcome. I hope it is not too long and about what you want.

“ Yours sincerely,

(Signed) GEORGE YOUNGHUSBAND.”

I breathed again, because such is the vanity of publishers that they like to imagine themselves with a keen scent for something good and new.

About the author I could gain little information. To his literary agents he wrote :—

“ I would prefer to write under the *nom de plume* of ‘ Afghan,’ but I leave the matter to you and the publisher to decide. It is not a question of service, as I am not in the service ; but if I write under a *nom de plume*, I can write more freely than I could if everybody knows who has written the book. I don’t want a knife between my ribs. I have however, left it to you.

“ As regards Mr. Jenkins’ kind inquiries, I am not out for notoriety, and I am afraid my private life would be of little interest to the public

“ I was many years on the North-West Frontier of India, and there met Asaf Khan—many Asaf Khans in fact, but only one actually of that name, the chaukidar of Jamrud, who went home to put a

stop to the blood fued, and did so exactly as related in the tale. One Asaf Khan I saw in Jhelum. He went for his wife's lover with his knife and split his skull in two down to the eyes.

"I was a few years in Peshawar; I have been in Kohat, Mardan, and other frontier places, and once went prospecting for gold up the Indus so far as the Black Mountains of Buner. The Border and her sons have always possessed a fascination for me; in fact, the North-West Border is the part of India I know best.

"Finally, I am English."

The only satisfaction I was able to glean from this letter was that Asaf Khan really existed.

The introduction which Sir George Younghusband enclosed appears on the next page.

HERBERT JENKINS.

WHAT I THINK OF ASAF KHAN

BY

MAJOR-GENERAL SIR GEORGE YOUNGHUSBAND,
K.C.M.G.

AS the traveller journeys up the Khyber Pass on his way to Afghanistan, to his left lies the land of the Afridis. A small country not larger than an average English county, though in every respect most unlike an English county! For here, instead of green fields and green trees and gentle hills and dales, are massed great rocky mountains, with narrow sparse valleys in between; instead of peaceful countryfolk at work in the fields, or townsmen taking their pleasures abroad, are to be seen fierce and rugged warriors, born and bred to the sword, living in mud-forts and only daring to cultivate their fields when armed to the teeth.

There are many such tribes along the North-West Frontier of India, the Mohmands, the Black Mountaineers, Bunerwals, Wazirs, and Mahsud Waziris, and all these Asaf Khan, the Afridi, the hero of these adventures, visited. Sometimes in search of war, occasionally thirsting for love, more often merely because he was bored with a quiet life, and wanted distraction of the more virulent sort. Above all these lesser tribes, the Afridis hold themselves as superior, and are by the British held of more importance.

The Afridi youth are brought up from childhood

like the Spartans, under the hardest conditions of life, and only the strongest and best, and those lucky enough to escape bullets and knives survive. These survivors are of splendid physique, with really phenomenal courage and powers of endurance. The Afridis are remarkably deadly marksmen, poverty having taught them never to waste a shot, whilst in hand-to-hand fighting they are exceeding awkward to meet with sword or knife.

Before the Great War, there were several thousands of Afridis in the regiments of the Indian Army, and these were always held by their British officers in very high esteem as fighting men. But during the war their Mullahs, or priests, got hold of a naturally superstitious race, and persuaded them that they were being led by the Infidels against the titular head of their religion, the Sultan of Turkey. Further it was impressed upon them by these false prophets that this road, if followed, led to sure damnation, that damnation being combined incidentally with the assured loss of all the beautiful ladies who would otherwise have joyfully greeted them at the gates of Paradise.

Thus these simple fellows became restive and unreliable, many deserted, many were guilty of worse crimes, so that it came about during the war that a clean sweep was made of them, and now no Afridis are enlisted in the Indian Army.

Asaf Khan is a typical Afridi, and his story has been told with rare fidelity by one who is manifestly very intimate with border life and border character. Those who have lived on the Frontier know Asaf Khan well, and have met him and his like many a time ; but it is well that people in England and the

Empire should learn a little from these graphic pages about those with whom the British officer has to deal on the North-West Frontier of India.

In Asaf Khan are blended the virtues and vices of the Afridi ; he is brave, enduring, hardy and chivalrous. He performs many gallant and even noble deeds every year of his life ; but betwixt and between whiles, he will perpetrate the most appallingly treacherous and bloodthirsty crimes. " It is Pathan custom," he will remark in complete explanation.

How Asaf Khan made peace in his village was a singularly drastic affair, and was certainly more instantly conclusive than that achieved by Peace Conferences in London or Paris. Even more drastically did Asaf Khan deal with his wife and another gentleman, who in this country would only have been called on to appear before Mr. Justice Horridge in the Divorce Court.

Though these wild tribesmen are taught from infancy to hate all Unbelievers, the chiefest of whom, the Mullahs preach, are the English ; yet strangely enough when these same Afridi warriors leave their mountain-homes and, by enlistment or otherwise, get to know British officers, an extraordinary devotion and even affection for them springs up. Such an attachment had Asaf Khan, the outlaw and free-lance, for Colonel Markham, and for that British officer he would go anywhere and do anything, even to the death.

As illustrating this personal devotion, once in my own regiment, the Guides, the night after an inspection by the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, the colonel was sitting in a chair in his garden, smoking a pipe before he went to bed. Out of the corner of his

eye he noticed standing silent, awaiting his notice, one of the men of the regiment, an Afridi.

Turning round, Colonel Lumsden said, "Hullo! Yakub Khan, what do you want?"

"Sahib, at the inspection to-day, I and others of my comrades noticed that the Lord Sahib spoke words that were displeasing to your Honour, and that your Honour's face became black. Now the Lord Sahib travels by road to-morrow to Peshawar; *but there is no reason whatever why he should arrive there!*"

I often told this story afterwards to Viceroy and War Lords who came to inspect us, and generally to their huge delight.

An Afridi, himself brought up in an atmosphere of treachery and deceit, where lying is a virtue and where no man's life is safe even from hour to hour, does not take long to learn that the British officer in contrast is perfectly straight and honest. He requires no bribes, he is as brave as himself, he is a man whose word is his bond and who incidentally does not stab or shoot people in the back. Curiously enough the Afridi, much against his upbringing, admires this singular being.

Of Asaf Khan's stirring adventures, whether as a rifle thief, a freebooter, a gay Lothario, or a peaceful night-watchman at an Indian railway station, those who read the following pages will find a wonderfully true and life-like presentment

The author is unknown to me, but he knows as much, or more about these wild border warriors as I who served as a soldier for 36 years or so within hail of the land of Afridis.

GEORGE YOUNGHUSBAND.

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EXPLOITS OF ASAF KHAN

CHAPTER I

HOW ASAF KHAN MADE PEACE

THE small railway station of Jamrud, away on the North-West Frontier of India, lay bathed in the rays of the setting sun. In the midst of a desolate plain, low barren hills to the west and Peshawar in the dim east, it nestled in the shelter of the mound on which stood the fort of Jamrud, that grim sentinel at the mouth of the Khyber.

A queer railway station, Jamrud. A small detached office on the platform ; the remainder a hollow square, with massive gates giving admittance to an inner courtyard. A queer building, but a very necessary type in a country where the chaukidars (watchmen) go armed night and day ; and where it is no uncommon occurrence for the staff to hear guns popping off during the night, an occasional dull thud on wood betraying the fact that light filtered from an overlooked crack in a shutter.

Asaf Khan, Pathan, Afridi, and for the nonce chaukidar at Jamrud, sat on his heels and thought.

Of many things he thought. Of the three weary years he had been *chaukidar* at Jamrud, a servant of the British Raj. Of the little hoard of rupees he had hidden in a safe place, for every little helps. Of the pig of a Hindustani stationmaster he had to obey, and whom he would one day kill,—he would hold him down on the office table and cut his throat. For Asaf Khan had a long score to settle with the stationmaster, and a Pathan never forgets a favour or an injury. He had suffered much at this man's hands, and some day he would repay.

Had not the son of a pig fined him a rupee for being asleep one night ! What if he were asleep ? Was he not Asaf Khan ? Was not Asaf Khan known far and wide ? Even from the Samana ranges to the land of the Bunerwals was Asaf Khan known ; and who dare to come to Jamrud save in peace while Asaf Khan was there !

And there was the affair of the raiding party. He was off duty that night, so what call had the stationmaster to interfere ? If he chose to take a jaunt on a moonlight night with some friends across the border, that was his affair.

It took twenty good rupees to hush the matter up ; for the stationmaster vowed that if he were not paid that sum he would report Asaf Khan's absence. Twenty rupees ! But the report would lead to inquiries and he would be called upon to explain the bullet wound in his calf, his sole share of the plunder from the raid.

Twenty rupees ! He would certainly kill the man. On second thoughts, he would not kill him. He would cut off his hands, nay, his forearms at the elbow, and would burn the stumps with fire to stop the bleeding.

Then the pig would live, and would remember Asaf Khan while he lived.

Then his thoughts turned to the home he had not seen for three long years. He thought of the valley below, where the walnut grew and the peaches and grapes ; of the bul-buls that sang in the pomegranate grove, and the fields of rich waving corn ; of the limpid stream that wound its tortuous way and with many a silvery cascade swelled the music of the birds. And of the higher hills he thought, those green hills that spring turned into a garden of wild flowers ; and of the peaks still higher where the wild sheep wandered, and where the pine reared its stately crown, swaying to the wind that blew soft harmonies through its needles, what time the wood pigeon, perched among the branches, called sweet melodies to its mate.

And then his eyes fell on the hills in front, and his thoughts returned to the present with a jolt. Back to the prosaic everyday. To the barren hills before him stretching north and south for miles in a monotony of bare rock ; to the burnt-up sandy plain between Jamrud and Peshawar ; and lastly to the solitary crow perched on the roof, occasionally breaking the silence with its infernal caw ! caw !

Three years ? Three lifetimes ! He *must* go back. After working three years for the British Raj, was he not entitled to three months' leave, one month for each year ? A fortnight to reach his home ; a fortnight to return. That would give him two clear months at home. Yes, he would go. He *must* go. The next time the Traffic Inspector Sahib came, he would submit an application for three months' leave. He would get the stationmaster to write it out for him, and would give him a rupee, two rupees even, to

write a recommendation across it ; then he would go home.

But the Blood Feud ! The Blood Feud with the family of Wazir Ali ! Ah, he had forgotten that. And yet it was because of the Blood Feud he was here in Jamrud. Were there not three deaths to his account ? Were not three avengers seeking his blood ? If he return to his home, he must remain in the village, at most go to his fields ; how could he brook this confinement ? His father and his brothers were content to live thus ; but he must roam where he listed—and the avengers were on the alert for his blood. Three had he killed, and a grim smile passed over his harsh features as he thought of the last one.

The enemy had tracked him for miles, he having no gun while his enemy had. The other fired and missed, but he, Asaf Khan, fell flat and rolled in apparent agony—rolled so that he presently lay behind a large rock. Rising quickly, he crept, concealed behind rocks and bushes, towards the oncoming and exultant foe. With a tiger-like spring he hurled himself upon the other, and disdaining to use his knife, felled him with a stone and bound his hands and feet while he lay senseless. How well he remembered it all !

He had laughed at his enemy and spat upon him ; and then, cutting off his feet had left him there to die and be food for the vultures ; while he, Asaf Khan, the victorious, had, when darkness fell, crept to the house of his enemy. Even to the centre of the village did he creep, and throwing the feet inside the door, had escaped, making his way by tracks well-known to him till he reached the Frontier and Jamrud. A post of chaukidar being vacant, he had applied, and had obtained it.

That was a man's life ! But the House of Wazir Ali was powerful, and the House of his father, Kadir Shah, was weak ; and there was a great thirst for his blood in the House of Wazir Ali. Nevertheless he must go, or he would surely die. Or perhaps he would go mad, and becoming Ghazi, take train to Peshawar and kill a few white people.

And, sinking his chin upon his knees, while the sun set and the quick darkness blotted out the landscape, he thought out a plan whereby he might return home, and also put an end to the Blood Feud between the House of Wazir Ali, and the House of his father, Kadir Shah. Not at once did the plan come in its entirety ; but step by step through the long watches it unfolded itself. In three days Asaf Khan gave in his application for three months' leave, and four days afterwards he left Jamrud.

* * * * *

“ Who comes ? ” From a watch tower of the Afridi village of Kai, perched high on a ridge, rang the challenge.

“ Who comes ? ” the watchman's voice again rang out.

An approaching figure, coming by way of the hills and not by the recognized path from the valley—and by so doing raising the suspicions of the watchman—halted ; and throwing up his empty hands to show he came in peace, called back.

“ What, brother, knowest thou not Asaf Khan ? Have I aged so in three years ? Has the valley of Peshawar burnt me out of my former semblance ? Or has old age dimmed thine old eyes that thou knowest

not Asaf Khan ? Asaf Khan, the Pathan. Once the slayer of men, now the Peacemaker ! ”

“ Asaf Khan,” grumbled the watchman. “ Has that shaitan (devil) returned ! That firebrand ! And what in the name of the Prophet does he mean by calling himself the Peacemaker ? Asaf Khan the Peacemaker ! ” and he smiled grimly at the thought. “ Just as the young men had become quiet ! Bismilla ! God is great ! ” and leaning over the parapet he called to a young man below.

“ O, Aziz ! There comes by the path from the hills one who claims to be Asaf Khan. Take thou thy gun and see if it be indeed Asaf Khan. Thou knowest him ? ” inquiringly.

“ Know him ! ” replied Aziz, with a shout of delight that set the watchman grumbling afresh. “ Who knows not Asaf Khan ! Here ! Where is my gun ? Listen there ! Hear ye ! Asaf Khan has returned ! The days of raiding shall be once more ! ” Leaping to his feet and seizing the gun his wife brought to the door, he rushed whooping and yelling down the village, out of the gate, and along the path by which his hero came.

Quickly the word passed ; and ere he reached the village, Asaf Khan was surrounded by the young men, all eager to embrace, clasp the hand of, and do honour to their hero.

To their surprise, surprise amounting almost to consternation, their hero seemed changed. When Afzul mentioned the latest raid, Asaf Khan appeared to take no interest in the recital ! But perhaps, because the raid was a small one, he considered it beneath his notice. They breathed again ; only to wonder anew

when an allusion by another to the well-known Blood Feud was received in silence—with distinct coldness !

What could have happened ? Had the heat of India, the enervating climate of the Peshawar Valley, sapped his courage ? One who had always been envious of Asaf Khan's fame ventured to hint as much ; but he received in turn such a look from those steel-grey eyes, that made him withdraw hurriedly, and efface himself in the crowd.

Their hero was silent. Hardly a word did he speak ; and when he did, how strange the words that fell from his lips !

“ I have learned much, my brothers ; and I will speak my thoughts to-night in the square before the mussafir khana (travellers' rest house) when all will hear. I have lived with the English ; and though, being unbelievers, they are in some things foolish, in other matters their wisdom is great. It is enough. To-night I will speak, and will tell the reason for my return. Where is my father, Kadir Shah, and where my brothers ? ”

An old man, tall and gaunt as all his tribe, with the aquiline nose and steel-grey eyes of the true Pathan, came striding from the village. He was followed by three young men, who from the likeness they bore the old man were easily to be recognized as his sons. Hurrying through the crowd that opened to give him passage, the old man rushed to Asaf Khan and threw himself on his son's breast.

“ My son ! My son ! At last mine old eyes, weary with watching for thee, behold thy face. Ah ! Son of mine ! Why hast thou tarried thus long ? Three

years ! To the young, three years are as three weeks ; but to the aged they are three eternities. But come, my heart, thou hast travelled far and art weary. Come, and the women of the House shall prepare for thee the rich pilau. Haste, someone, and carry the news ! Let a kid be killed, and fowls, and with them a pilau be made. A good pilau with many spices ; and see that they stint not the ghee (clarified butter) nor the salt. And let raisins also be washed, and almonds and walnuts cracked, and the dried apricots stewed ; for this my son has returned at last."

"What news, my son ? Hast thou returned to remain, or wilt thou tarry but a time and again leave thy father's heart desolate ? "

"Father," spake Asaf Khan, "have word sent to the elders that I would speak at a jirgah meeting in the mussafir khana this night. Ask me not what I would say ; be it enough that I speak of peace and the healing of the Blood Feud between thy House and the House of Wazir Ali."

"Peace is good," remarked the old man sententially. "Also the House of Wazir Ali outnumbers us two to one." Nevertheless, he looked strangely at his son.

Asaf Khan accompanied his father to his house, and the crowd dispersed, with many expressions of wonder at the strange words that had fallen from Asaf Khan's lips ; Asaf Khan, who from childhood they had looked up to as the greatest warrior on the Border. Asaf Khan, whose chief delight in life was a raid, and who thought a raid tame, bringing little honour, if killing went not with it. Asaf Khan who had kept up his end of the Blood Feud better than any man of his House, and whose

treatment of the last enemy he had slain was the pride and the boast of the village.

And now he returned prating of peace ! Of the healing of the Blood Feud ! Of a surety Peshawar must be a vile place, and the rule of the English demoralizing. That a Pathan, a great warrior, one of the greatest, should, after a sojourn there of a bare three years, return babbling of peace and the healing of blood feuds ! It was incredible ! Unthinkable ! Their village, which was known and feared for miles even to the border of the Afghan country, would be shamed, would become a thing to laugh at. To spit upon ! And with many head-shakings they went their way to their various employments, to wait with what patience they might possess the coming of night, when Asaf Khan had promised to make all things clear.

Night fell ; and the elders of the village, together with all the men—every male above the age of eighteen is considered a man, and is entitled to a seat at the jirgah—assembled in the square before the mussafirkhana. A large fire in the centre threw a fitful glare over the scene, casting a ruddy glow on the savage, swarthy faces with their black brows and gleaming eyes, here glinting on a rifle barrel, there thrown back coldly from the scabbard of a mighty sword, and everywhere glistening on the curved Afghan knives in embroidered belts.

A space was left near the elders, of whom Kadir Shah was one ; and presently the old man arrived with his sons. The usual hum of welcome was absent, for their hero had fallen in their eyes, the crackling of the fires, and the bubbling of the hookahs (Indian pipes) alone

breaking the silence. After a short interval, Hafiz Ali, the chief elder of the village, rose from the charpoy (string bedstead) on which he had been seated. Hafiz Ali, who in spite of his seventy years was still erect through all his six feet odd ; who was as strong, as swift, as keen of sight as many of the young men. Hafiz Ali, of whose turbulent youth were still told tales of daring and bloodshed that rivalled, if they did not surpass, the exploits of Asaf Khan himself. Hafiz Ali, now a grave elder talking wisdom, and restraining as far as may be the headstrong young bloods of the village. Hafiz Ali rose, and turned to Asaf Khan.

“ Welcome again to Kai, O Asaf Khan. Thou hast been long absent, serving the British Raj we have heard, and now thou hast returned. But in what guise ? Have the years taught thee wisdom, or does thy blood still run hot as in the days when thy hand was always raised in anger, and thy thirst for blood was as the thirst of the desert for rain ? Hast thou come to dwell ; or wilt thou tarry here but a short time, returning to the service thou hast taken with the British ? There is peace, and there is quietness in the village and in the valley. Even the House of Wazir Ali, the enemy of thy father’s House, has sought no blood for many moons. Say then, O Asaf Khan, comest thou in peace, or comest thou to stir up the young men to raids and the shedding of blood ? Speak ! ” and gathering his loose robes about him, he resumed his seat on the charpoy.

Asaf Khan rose and allowed his gaze to wander over the assembly. A difficult task was before him. The elders would be on his side, and would approve of what he was about to say ; but the scorn and contempt of

the young men would be hard to bear. Afterwards he would make them eat their words ! That he would, or he would tear out their tongues to feed the dogs ! But in the meantime he must bear their mockery and contempt. His gaze wandered round the circle yet again, finally resting where the elders sat ; and squaring his shoulders, he spoke.

“ People of Kai,” he said, and his voice rang out over the assembly like a war trumpet. “ Ye know me. Ye know who I am, and what I have done to mine enemies. Me, Asaf Khan, do ye know, as all men know me. From Afghanistan to Hindustan, from the Samana ranges to the country of the Bunerwals am I known and feared. I, Asaf Khan ! ”

This was talk they loved, and a shout from the young men interrupted him. But the elders looked askance at one another and at Asaf Khan.

“ Also ye know of the Blood Feud between the House of Wazir Ali and the House of my father, Kadir Shah ; and of the many I have slain. Especially of the last have ye heard ; when I, armed only with a knife, disdaining to use even that knife, yet overcame one armed with a gun, the gun which is even now in the house of my father, Kadir Shah. But it is not of these things, neither the shedding of blood nor of war that I would speak, but of peace.”

It was now the turn of the young men to be silent, while the elders murmured their approval. A grim smile passed over Asaf Khan’s face, and he continued.

“ Brothers, for three long years have I been from home in a strange land, and have there learned many things. Of one of these will I speak, and do ye judge.

I heard it from an Englishman to whom I taught Pusto, and these are his words.

“ First I told him many things of our life here. Of our raidings ; of our wars ; of how the village of Kai was feared by all ; and of the Blood Feud did I speak.

“ The Englishman listened, and naught spake he ; but when I had finished, he took from a heap six sticks.

“ ‘ Asaf Khan,’ he said, ‘ here be six sticks ; take them one by one and break them,’ and I did so.

“ Then did the Englishman take six more sticks of the same thickness, but these he bound together. ‘ Asaf Khan,’ he said, ‘ Thou didst break these other sticks which were loose ; take now these six which are bound together, and break them,’ but I could not.

“ ‘ This, then, is the lesson,’ spake the Englishman. ‘ The English nation is all powerful, and has conquered Hindustan, which is a great country. Yet is England a small country, and the English few in number. In the days when they conquered Hindustan, Asaf Khan, their numbers were even less ; but—’ and he pointed to the bundle I could not break, ‘ the English were bound together and were all one. The people of India—’ and he pointed to the sticks which I had broken, ‘ were not bound. Rajputs, Marathas, Moguls, Sikhs, they were loose sticks ; and the English broke them one by one.’

“ And then he said that we tribes were even loose sticks, which the English could break when they listed—whom even the Amir of Kabul could break ; for the

Durani Chief has bound the tribes of Afghanistan together so that they are now one. These are the words of the Englishman, judge ye of their wisdom. The Englishman spake further, but first decide ye on this. Afterwards will I tell ye what further he spake. Not now, but when the work has begun."

He ceased, and a murmur arose ; of approval from the space where the elders sat, of conflicting opinions from the rest of the assembly. Raising his hand to command silence, Asaf Khan resumed.

" Think not, my brothers, that I shall speak with my tongue alone ; in deeds also will I speak. I have consulted with my father, Kadir Shah, and to-morrow will a messenger be sent, and this is the message he will bear to the House of Wazir Ali.

" Because we would heal this Blood Feud between the House of Wazir Ali and our House, we will ask that Wazir Ali and two of his House shall meet Kadir Shah with two of his House at an appointed spot half way between their village and our village. There they shall consult together, and come to some agreement whereby there shall be peace, and this Blood Feud be a thing of the past.

" And that they may agree to this thing, we shall give them rich presents ; and because my hand has been heaviest against them, I shall give back the gun which I took from the last man I slew, and shall also give my own gun. Thus shall there be peace, and the binding of the sticks begin. For if House makes peace with House, then will village make peace with village, and tribe with tribe. The loose sticks shall be bound, and the Tribes of the Border be strong ! "

The last few words were almost drowned in the clamour that arose.

What ! Give guns ! Precious guns ! Guns each worth the life of a man ! Give guns out of the village to another village ! Never ! Why this silly talk of binding sticks ? They, the men of Kai, were a thick stick, and could break the other sticks. They could even break the stick of the British Raj if need be !

Those of the House of Kadir Shah were loudest in their condemnation. Never should it be said that blood could be forgotten ! If this thing were done, they would become the scorn and byword of the Border ! The House of Wazir Ali would refuse ; would call them women and cowards !

The clamour rose and fell and rose again ; but fell, to finally cease when it was seen that Kadir Shah, the father of Asaf Khan, had risen to his feet. With upraised hand he commanded silence ; and at sight of the gaunt figure of the old man, standing with upraised hand, the tumult gradually subsided.

When silence had at last fallen upon the excited men, Kadir Shah, stepping forward a pace, cast a glance from his still keen and hawk-like eyes round the assembly.

“ Men of Kai,” he said, “ to you I speak. Men of my House, to you more especially do I speak. What my son, Asaf Khan, has said, is good. I, Kadir Shah, say it is good. What he has said, I say. His words are my words ; and any of my House that say my words are not good, shall be cast out and shall no longer be of my House. I am the Head of my House,” he thundered. “ What I say is good, that thing is good ! And what I say is bad, that thing is bad ! I say that

the Blood Feud is bad, and it is bad ! I say that if the Blood Feud is ended, it is good ; and it is good ! Will any man of my House say that what I say is good, is not good ? Or that what I say is bad, is not bad ? Speak ! ”

A deep hush followed his words, for all men knew Kadir Shah and his ungovernable temper. Not long before, he cast a young man from his House and from the village, never to return on pain of being shot, but for that he doubted the word of Kadir Shah when Kadir Shah spoke of how he in his young days, armed with his Afghan knife only, had overcome and slain two Sikhs armed with tulwars.

A great silence therefore fell ; the men of the House of Kadir Shah scarce daring to breathe lest that eagle eye mark them.

The old man stood gazing sternly round for a few moments, but as none spoke, he turned presently to his son.

“ We will go, my son. To-day have we spoken, to-morrow shall we do,” and with the usual farewell to the assembly, father and son left the square.

Their departure was the signal for another outburst ; but now the crowd was divided, the men of the House of Kadir Shah and the friends of his House against the rest, and eyes flashed, while many a word was said in anger that led to bloodshed in after days.

The elders conferred gravely apart, and presently Hafiz Ali rose. He was the chief elder, and all fell silent to hear his words.

“ Men of Kai. What Asaf Khan has said, is good ; and what Kadir Shah has said, is good. We, the elders, say it is good. And as this thing concerns

Kadir Shah and the men of his House alone, let them therefore do that which seems best in their eyes. But because the words which Asaf Khan has spoken sound strange in our ears, we will wait, and will see further of this peace. If it is good, we may then see to the further binding of these sticks. But Asaf Khan told us not what further the Englishman said, nor if it concerned this binding of the sticks or some other matter. Has any man here heard Asaf Khan speak thereon ? ”

He paused for an answer ; but none spoke. Some, when his eyes fell upon them, shook their heads ; but at length one volunteered the statement that Asaf Khan had held private converse with no man since entering the village, save with his father, Kadir Shah, alone.

“ They went into the fields,” he said, “ sitting in the open where none might approach unseen, and there they held converse for upward of half an hour. But it would not have been on any serious matter they spoke, for they laughed as they talked ; and at the end Kadir Shah laughed loudly and embraced his son, after which they returned to the village in merry mood. The subject on which they conversed must have been a light one, and not this matter of the Blood Feud.”

With many headshakings and mutterings the assembly dispersed ; and next day went a messenger forth from the House of Kadir Shah to the House of Wazir Ali bearing presents. And Ali Wazir accepted the presents and swore on the Holy Koran and on the Holy Qaaba at Mecca that two of his House would come, unarmed and unaccompanied, to the appointed spot. Also a messenger came from the House of Wazir

Ali to the House of Kadir Shah, and to him Kadir Shah, his son, Asaf Khan, and Nadir Shah, the brother of Kadir Shah, swore on the Holy Koran and on the Holy Qaaba at Mecca, that they would come unarmed and unaccompanied to the appointed spot.

So it came to pass that on a certain day Kadir Shah and two of his House met Wazir Ali and two of his House, and arranged many things concerning the Blood Feud. But because the demands of Wazir Ali were great, there was nothing settled on that day ; and so they met and parted. Again they met, and a third time at the appointed place, and talked of this thing; and at last, at the third time of meeting, Wazir Ali listened to the words of Kadir Shah and of his son, Asaf Khan. Also did he hear the tale of the sticks, and his heart inclined to peace.

Also he thought of other things. It is true his House was more numerous, but was not Asaf Khan a host in himself ? Also that village of Kai was powerful, and the men of Kai often stole his cattle. Besides, he would get guns ; and Asaf Khan had brought rich clothes from Peshawar, muslins and silks and embroidered belts ; and all these would Asaf Khan give to Wazir Ali that the hearts of his House would be made glad, and would incline their men to make peace.

At last the House of Wazir Ali agreed to make peace with the House of Kadir Shah, and to attend a great feast at the village of Kai. This would Asaf Khan provide with the money he had brought from Hindustan, and then would be given the guns, the muslins, the silks and embroidered belts to the House of Wazir Ali. Some of the muslins and silks were given at this third meeting, that the women of the House of Wazir

Ali might make a brave show, and not be ashamed before the women of the House of Kadir Shah.

* * * * *

It was night, and a great fire burned in the centre of the square before the mussafir khana. Around the fire was seated a crowd seldom seen in a border village, a crowd not only of men, but of women and children also ; for every member of each House must be present, even to the smallest ; lest in after years that one say he was not present, and so the feud begin afresh. And because the women were present, the members of the two Houses were alone admitted to the square, no other man being present.

The House of Wazir Ali arrived earlier in the day ; and after seeing their women safely in the zenana, or women's apartments, of Kadir Shah's dwelling, the strangers were escorted round the village by the elders and the men of the House of Kadir Shah, the rest of the men of Kai keeping severely aloof.

They did not understand this talk of peace ; nor did they like strangers in their village. It was not by peace that Kai had become powerful, and a village to be feared ; and they did not like strange men to walk in their village gazing with curious eyes upon their homes. Many a glance was cast upon the gun in the corner, and many a hand closed softly on the hidden knife at the girdle.

They did not understand this peace. Above all they could not understand why the men of the House of Kadir Shah should agree to it. Let them refuse, and let him thrust them out. Then would the House of Kadir Shah consist of Kadir Shah, his sons, and the

son of Asaf Khan, who was a boy ; which was foolishness. Had they refused to take part in this shameful peace, Kadir Shah could not have cast them out of his House, else his House would be but a name.

And yet, though no later than the previous evening the men of the House of Kadir Shah had been bitter against this peace, none daring to speak openly however, for fear of the wrath of Kadir Shah ; yet behold ! to-day they walked with the House of Wazir Ali, with smiles on their faces, doing service ! How this strange thing had come to pass none could say. At morning, Kadir Shah had ordered all his House to assemble at his dwelling, women as well as men ; and had spoken to them for one hour while his sons kept watch at the door so that none should hear what passed within. Men wondered, and presently the door opened and Kadir Shah and his House came forth. To the mussafir khana they went ; and Kadir Shah bade one man stand here, and one there, till he had told them all they should do in the service of their guests. The women also he directed, telling them what they should do, and on whom they should wait.

And the people of Kai, looking curiously into the square, saw that the men of the House of Kadir Shah were changed in heart. They had gone into his dwelling with dark looks and frowning brows, but now laughing and merry, as if pleased with this shameful peace. But the faces of the women they could not see because of the boorkhas (veils) they wore.

And the men of Kai marvelled at the sight, wondering if this thing were of witchcraft.

The House of Wazir Ali having arrived, they were first shown the village ; and then did Kadir Shah and

his son, Asaf Khan, bring forth into the courtyard before their dwelling the two guns, the silks and muslins, and the embroidered belts. Also with these did Kadir Shah give a sack of raisins, a sack of almonds, and, greatest gift of all, except the guns, a white she buffalo with her young calf.

The heart of Wazir Ali rejoiced when he received these gifts ; and he embraced Kadir Shah and called him brother. Likewise, the eldest son of Wazir Ali embraced Asaf Khan, and would have called him brother, but could not, for there was not sufficient breath within his body, the embrace of Asaf Khan being even as the embrace of the great bear that lives amongst the mountains of Afghanistan.

Others of the Houses of Wazir Ali and Kadir Shah also embraced ; and one whose balcony overlooked the courtyard of Kadir Shah's dwelling said that always the men of the House of Kadir Shah laughed.

In the evening they came to the square before the mussafir khana where the feast was prepared, Kadir Shah's dwelling not being sufficiently large to accommodate this great company, and there they sat round the great fire to partake of the food prepared by the women of Kadir Shah's House, a great feast.

Great nands (unleavened cakes) were there, flavoured with assafoetida ; chicken pilau ; kid pilau ; and kababs (small pieces of meat roasted on skewers). Sweet pilaus with sour milk, and many kinds of chutneys and achars (oil pickle). And to be eaten afterwards were sweetmeats, almonds, raisins, walnuts, and pistas (pistachio nuts). To drink there was green

tea and black tea, and sherbets of Hindustan ; and all ate and drank and were happy.

The women of the House of Kadir Shah brought out the food ; and the men waited on the men of the House of Wazir Ali, and the women on the women. But because the House of Wazir Ali was greater in number than the House of Kadir Shah, many of the men waited each on two men. Kadir Shah waited on Wazir Ali and the brother of Wazir Ali, while Asaf Khan waited on two of the sons of Wazir Ali.

So they feasted and were merry ; and Kadir Shah, plucking forth a hidden knife from his bosom, smote Wazir Ali on the neck so that his head came off, and his blood spouted forth and mingled with the food in his dish. Then Kadir Shah smote the brother of Wazir Ali. Fair on the centre of the forehead did he smite him ; and because the man wore for coolness only a small skull-cap, and not a turban, the heavy Afghan knife cut straight through, dividing the head into two halves.

And every man of the House of Kadir Shah, plucking forth a hidden knife, smote the man or men on whom he waited, and slew them. Some slew one, and some slew two ; and before the blood of Wazir Ali ceased spouting, every man of his House was dead.

And the women of the House of Kadir Shah, throwing off their boorkhas, seized the women of the House of Wazir Ali and the children, and slew them. Some they stabbed, and of some they smashed the heads in with the iron pestles they used for grinding spices, and of some they cut the throats. The children were killed in like manner ; but the babes they killed by dashing

them on the ground or against the walls of the mussafir khana.

And the men of Kai, hearing the noise, came and saw and ran and told others ; so that presently a great crowd assembled round the square. But they were silent, and spoke not, for they knew not yet what these things might mean.

When all the men of the House of Wazir Ali were dead, then did Asaf Khan stand forth and speak to the men of his father's House.

“Men of the House of Kadir Shah, what shall be done with these pigs and sons of pigs ? Who will bury them ? Here is a great fire ; do ye this, that having no bones, they cannot rise to trouble us on the last day,” and with a swing, he hurled the nearest body into the great fire that burned in the centre of the square ; another followed ; and another ; and also they threw on vast quantities of wood, that the bodies might be utterly consumed and naught remain.

Because the heat of the fire became increasingly great, they had presently to move further away. Asaf Khan's favourite wife had to move from where she sat ; and Asaf Khan, whose eyes loved to dwell upon her, noticed that she did not move with her accustomed grace, and that, moreover, her boorkha did not hang straight.

Striding across, he tore the boorkha aside and disclosed the child she was seeking to hide, a chubby little lad of three, the last of the House of Wazir Ali. The child was seated near her when the killing began ; and being young and foolish she had been seized with pity and had sought to save it, forgetting that to kill the snake and leave the young, was but to breed more snakes.

Naught said Asaf Khan to his wife, she being young and of little sense, and also because his heart inclined towards her ; but seizing the child by the arm, he lifted him, placed him on his shoulder, and strode out into the open where all might see, the men of his House, and the men of Kai. And as they wondered, he spake.

“ Listen, ye men, both of my father’s House, and of Kai. I told not all that the Englishman said, but now ye shall hear. After he had taught me the lesson of the sticks, I asked him why then the English or the Amir did not break us sticks of the Border, and these were his words. The English, he said, will that the Tribes be between their land and the land of the Amir. For when we give the English trouble, they send a few men and punish us ; but were their country and the country of the Amir to adjoin, and the Afghans were to raid in the country of the English, then would the English have to send a great army to punish them. For this reason will not the English take our country, and neither will they let the Amir take it. This being so, we are safe, we single sticks, and there is no need for binding. As for the Blood Feud between our House and the House of Wazir Ali, this child ”—indicating the child on his shoulder—“ is the last of the House of Wazir Ali.”

Turning suddenly, he caught the little fellow by the legs, jerked him from his shoulder, and hurled him screaming into the middle of the great fire.

“ Now,” he said, turning back to the men, “ there is no longer a blood feud between the House of Wazir Ali and the House of my father, Kadir Shah, for the House of Wazir Ali is not. Men of Kai, have I done well ? ”

And the men of Kai rushed into the square with a great shout.

“It is good ! Asaf Khan is himself again ! He is great as he has always been ! There is no longer a blood feud for it has been wiped out in blood ! In blood and fire has it been wiped out ! Great is the cunning of the mighty Asaf Khan ! ”

But the elders shook their heads.

“It is not good,” they said. “Also Asaf Khan hath become too great a man for this small village.”

CHAPTER II

HOW ASAF KHAN DEFENDED THE HOUSE

ASAF KHAN, Pathan, Afridi, sat in the house of his father, Kadir Shah. His rifle pointed through a loophole, his eye glanced along the barrel, and he had been sitting thus for an hour, waiting.

In the morning, when the rush first came, there was much to do and he got many a pretty shot; but now the foe was wary, and only an occasional glimpse could he get of a flutter of cloth or the tip of a rifle barrel. Ammunition is scarce on the Border, and costs much money; therefore was Asaf Khan wasting none, firing only when he knew he would kill.

Ah! That was an arm—a shoulder—a head! A sharp pressure on the trigger; and a figure that pirouetted wildly in the open before falling prone told that another had been added to Asaf Khan's roll.

But surely that was a man of Kai, even as others that lay in the stillness of death, scattered here and there before the house, were men of Kai! Asaf Khan shooting down men of Kai! Men of Kai

seeking the life of Asaf Khan ! How had this terrible thing come to pass ?

* * * * *

Asaf Khan, Pathan, Afridi, sat in the sun outside the wall of the courtyard, and thought. Of many things he thought as he gazed across the valley, but mostly he thought of Jamrud.

Should he return to Jamrud and again take up his service with the British Raj, or should he remain here ? There was no longer a blood feud between the House of Wazir Ali and the House of his father, Kadir Shah, and no avenger tracked him as he roamed the hills in search of game ; but still he was not content. After the broader outlook at Peshawar, the valley seemed confined ; and though he strode in glorious freedom over the mountains, he missed the life and movement of the great city. It was too still here, too silent, and the life at Peshawar and Jamrud had given him a distaste for solitude.

True, he could again lead raiding parties, and make his name once more the terror, admiration, and detestation of all ; for the young men would obey his lightest word, and thirsted to be led forth by the renowned Asaf Khan ; but there were many eyes on the Border, and many whispering tongues. Should word of his doings be carried to Peshawar, he could no more go to that city or to Jamrud till such time as men had forgotten.

And as he pondered on these things, he heard voices from the other side of the wall, voices of some within the courtyard. But because they were the voices of women, of his two elder wives, he paid no attention ;

for the talk of women is foolish and without meaning, even as the babbling of a brook. But presently a word caught his ear, then a sentence; and he sat erect listening, scarcely crediting that such words could be spoken.

“Yes,” continued one of the voices. “It will be fortunate for her if he goes to Jamrud soon; else will he surely come to know this thing, and then——!” An expressive pause completed the sentence.

“Had we not better tell him?” asked the other

“And have our noses cut off or our tongues slit?” jeered the first. “Thinkest thou he would believe us? Is she not the favourite wife? She would deny everything. She would look at him with those great eyes of hers, and what would become of us? But the rashness of the woman passes comprehension. He goes down to the valley this afternoon, returning late; lo! she will meet Noor Din in the little copse at the second turn of the path on the other side of the village. It grows dark at seven; at that hour will she meet him, for she can go and come unperceived.”

The voices moved away, and Asaf Khan sat motionless, gazing vacantly before him.

At first he could hardly believe that such a thing could be possible. This young wife, to whom he had been married during his absence in Jamrud, and whom he had found waiting him in his father's house, loved him not. To her he had given the best of the presents he had brought from Hindustan. Her, he had almost loved. She had deceived him with false words of love, calling him the Light of her Eyes, the Lord of her Life; yet she loved him not. Worse! Infinitely, shamefully worse, she loved another!

She, his wife, loved another man, and had brought shame and dishonour upon his House !

The great veins swelled in his forehead, and he ground his teeth with rage. This dishonour could only be wiped out in blood ; and in blood should it be wiped out. Noor Din was the traitor ! Noor Din, the son of Hafiz Ali, the chief elder of the village. That should not save him. He, Asaf Khan, would have his blood ! Noor Din's blood would he have ! Ay, and the blood of anyone who should seek to prevent him having that blood ! They would meet in the copse at the second turning, he also would be in that copse !

At six o'clock he left for the valley ; but before reaching the bottom he made a detour to the right, and again ascending, sought the copse behind the village. It was deserted, and concealing himself, he waited for the blood he meant to have that night.

His gun he had not brought—there was no need—but his trusty Afghan knife with its keen edge and heavy blade, he wore within his girdle ; and it was enough. Many a man had seen that blade flash a moment before he died, and the blood it spilt to-night would be naught to the blood it had already spilt. Let Noor Din be armed with what weapons he may, the knife would conquer. Concealing himself within a dense corner of the grove, he awaited the advent of the doomed pair.

At dusk the unsuspecting Noor Din arrived ; and standing just within the shadow of the grove, waited for the coming of the woman. Presently a light footfall was heard, and the woman entered the grove.

With a cry of delight Noor Din sprang forward to meet her ; but at the same moment Asaf Khan stepped from his hiding place, and for a second the three stood together. For a second only. Stooping swiftly, with a blow from his keen-edged knife Asaf Khan took off the man's foot at the ankle, and with a scream of agony the wretch fell screaming on the ground. For a moment the woman stood petrified with terror, and then she turned to flee. Too late. With the spring of a tiger Asaf Khan was upon her, and as she turned to plead for mercy, stooping swiftly he cut off her foot as he had cut off the man's. With a shriek she fell beside her guilty companion.

Then Asaf Khan laughed, and the night shuddered at the sound.

" So, Noor Din, thou would'st dishonour my House! And thou, woman, thou would'st have a lover ? "

Stepping closer, he stooped suddenly ; and seizing Noor Din's other foot, cut off that also.

" Now, Noor Din, will I race thee to the feet of thy next love. But how wilt thou run? Wilt run on thy hands? Or wilt crawl on thy belly like the snake thou art? Had'st no fear when seeking the dishonour of my House? Did'st think Asaf Khan one to be satisfied with a money payment? Did'st think he would take vengeance on the woman alone? Nay! I will treat thee alike. What she shalt receive, that shalt thou receive, neither more, nor less! " and in spite of her shrieks and prayers, he cut off the woman's other foot.

The cries and groans of the unhappy pair now filled the grove ; but Asaf Khan only laughed.

“Give me thy hand, Noor Din,” he cried, “the hand that clasped mine in friendship—a friendship that hid this! Give me thy hand!” and seizing the man’s hand, he cut it off at the wrist.

“Now thy hand, woman; the hand, the palm of which and the nails thou did’st stain with henna that it might appear more beautiful in my sight. Give me thy hand! Now the other hand!” and he turned again to the fainting Noor Din.

And so he chopped alternately; first the feet, then the hands, then the legs from the knee—which took two cuts each in the case of Noor Din—and lastly he cut off their arms at the elbows.

“Thus does Asaf Khan to those who would dishonour his House!” he said, looking down with great satisfaction at the mutilated forms.

The woman’s cries had ceased, for she was dead; but Noor Din was still moaning when two men, cousins of Noor Din, burst into the grove. Hearing the screams, they had come to learn the meaning of the outcry. It was dark within the copse, and at first they could see nothing; but guided by the cries, they approached, and in the dim light saw the figure of Asaf Khan before them, though they could not recognize who stood there so silent and so threatening.

“What is it?” asked one of the men. “What mean these groans? Who art thou who standest so silent in the darkness?”

“It is I, Asaf Khan,” was the harsh reply. “One of my wives met Noor Din, the son of Hafiz Ali, in this copse; and I came also. At my coming they were struck with fear, and trembled; and because their fear was great, they trembled greatly. So

much did they tremble, that they shook off their feet and their hands, their arms and their legs ; and the pieces lie beside them. See ! ” He struck a match, and held it so that the light fell on the mutilated bodies.

“ In the name of Allah ! ” cried the men in horror. “ Who has done this thing ? ”

“ I, Asaf Khan,” was the stern reply. “ I have taken revenge on those who dishonoured my House : I have wiped out the dishonour in their blood ! ”

There was a moment’s silence, and then, “ Are they dead ? ” asked one of the men in a hushed voice of awe.

“ I cannot say,” replied Asaf Khan indifferently. “ I chopped off their feet and their hands, their knees and their elbows ; otherwise I harmed them not.”

The man stared at Asaf Khan incredulously, and then the blood rushed into his eyes. Noor Din was of his House, and this man had slain Noor Din. Had slain him thus !

“ Fiend ! ” and he started forward with upraised hand. “ Devil from hell ! To treat a man thus for the sake of a woman ! Why could’st thou not have slain the woman and cited the man before the elders ? He would have been fined, and thou could’st have married another wife. But to slay him ! to slay him thus ! Ah, how thou hast dealt with him ! ” he continued in a sort of wail. “ Thou hast chopped him even in pieces, and yet he is not dead ! ”

Asaf Khan spat on the ground. “ Am I a dog, that money should buy my honour ? The honour of my House is above money payment ; the price is death ! ”

“But to chop him even in pieces!” groaned the other. “Die thyself! Devil!” and whipping a knife from his belt, he sprang at Asaf Khan.

Better would it have been for him had he refrained; but rage and horror blinded him. With a quick turn of the wrist Asaf Khan warded off the blow; and before the other could recover, Asaf Khan struck. Fierce and hard he struck, and the keen, heavy Afghan knife, catching the man on the temple, cut off the top of his head above the eyes, for the strength of Asaf Khan, and the force of the blow he could strike were the wonder of all, even in that country of strong men.

Without a groan the body sank, a huddled heap, to the ground; the top of the head falling beside it with a horrid squash, and looking in the dim light like some evil fungus. His companion fled shrieking, and Asaf Khan, knowing that many of the House of Hafiz Ali would come that way presently seeking him, left the copse. Shielded by the darkness, he made his way home; and there, having barred and made fast the door, he told his father and his three brothers of the thing he had done.

“The House of Hafiz Ali will seek my blood,” he said. “Let me, my father, remain here and fight them. But do thou and my brothers and my son seek safety elsewhere; so will their wrath not fall upon ye, but upon me alone.”

The younger men were about to burst forth indignantly, but Kadir Shah stayed them with upraised hand.

“Nay,” he said, and a grim smile played about his lips. “Thou hast done well, my son, but thou speakest ill. It was thus we cleansed the stain from

our honour in the days when this shameful practice of payment was not. But it was not only thine honour which was cleansed, it was the honour of the House, our House. Thinkest thou that we shall leave thee? Rather will we protect thee, even with our bodies."

Asaf Khan strove to persuade them to leave while there was yet time, but they laughed at his arguments, and in a few minutes it was too late. They were interrupted by a great clamour without, and a fierce hammering on the gate of the courtyard.

"Bring out the murderer!" they cried. "Bring out the one who slays men, not as men are slain, but as sheep are carved by the butcher! Bring him forth! Blood cries for blood! Two men has he slain, two men of the House of Hafiz Ali, and the House of Hafiz Ali demands his blood in payment! Beware, Kadir Shah, lest it turn to a blood feud between thy House and the House of Hafiz Ali!"

Stepping to one of the windows, which was of wood as were all the doors and windows, Kadir Shah threw it open and disclosed the great crowd that stood without. All were armed, and many bore torches that lit up the square.

A still greater roar greeted his appearance; but the old man surveyed them in scornful silence, till presently the tumult ceased, and some in the crowd called on him to speak. With another contemptuous look round, the old man addressed them.

"Who are ye who come rioting against my gates? Ye speak of the House of Hafiz Ali; since when has the House of Hafiz Ali become so vast? Does all the rabble of the village belong to the House of Hafiz

Ali ? It is not meet that the Head of a House should converse with the rabble concerning the affairs of his House. Where, then, is Hafiz Ali ? Let him stand forth, that we two, the Heads of our Houses, may talk on this matter."

"Here ! Here is Hafiz Ali !" cried the crowd ; and an old man, a mournful figure, tottered forth from the throng. With garments rent, and with dust upon his head and venerable grey beard he came forth ; his form no longer upright, but bowed beneath the calamity that had fallen upon him in his old age.

"Alas !" he cried in accents of woe. "Why hast thy son done this thing ? Why didst thy son slay my son ? Ah ! my son ! My son !"

"Thy son sought to dishonour our House," replied Kadir Shah sternly. "He has paid the penalty, which is death !"

"But he slew him not !" cried the unhappy father. "He chopped him in pieces. Ah, Allah ! What a cruel fate ! But that fiend, thy son, was not merciful enough to slay him ! I, his father, had in mercy to slay mine own son ! My son ! My son !"

Kadir Shah seized on the point immediately, as a drowning man will grasp at a straw.

"His blood, then, be upon thy head !" he cried. "It was by thee thy son was slain, not by my son ! Thou hast said it ! Why comest thou here with this tumult, seeing thy son's death lies not at my son's door ?"

There was a moment of stupefied silence, followed by so fierce a roar of execration, that the windows and door literally shook with the volume of sound ;

but presently, seeing that Hafiz Ali had more to say, the crowd became silent.

“Lies the death of my son at my door or thy son’s door,” quavered the old man, “at whose door lies the death of my sister’s son? By whose hand did he die?”

“By the hand of my son he died,” acknowledged Kadir Shah. “But he would have slain my son; so in this, therefore, there lies no blame on my son. Thy son was slain by thee; and thy sister’s son was slain by my son that he himself might not be slain.” Suddenly he addressed the crowd. “Since when has your council of elders ceased to exist?” he thundered. “And thou, Hafiz Ali, who art the chief elder, why comest thou here with this shouting rabble? Let the matter be laid before the elders in due form. Let them decide if my son is to die for the man he slew not, or for the man he slew to save his own life!”

Hafiz Ali shook his clenched hand at the window, his form trembling with fury. “Thy son shall die!” he screamed. “Say what thou wilt, thy son shall die! And even as my son died shall thy son die!”

“Thy son’s death lies not at my son’s door,” said Kadir Shah coldly. “My son shall not be slain.”

“He shall! He shall!” shrieked Hafiz Ali, foaming at the mouth so that the white spittle ran down his beard. “Asaf Khan shall die! I, Hafiz Ali, say it! If none else will slay him, I will! Why lurks he behind closed doors? Does he think thus to escape my vengeance and the vengeance of the men of my House? If need be, we will tear down thy

dwelling, Kadir Shah ; but the blood of Asaf Khan we will surely have ! ”

Kadir Shah stroked his beard, but answered nothing ; and Hafiz Ali turned to the crowd.

“ Men of my House and friends of my House. Let us go hence, for the hour is late ; and at dawn will the elders confer on this matter. But lest the slayer escape in the darkness, let the house be guarded. Guard ye it well, both back and front and on both sides ; and let none pass, neither in nor out, till the elders have decided.”

At first the crowd would have attacked the gates of the courtyard ; but Hafiz Ali and other elders who were present restrained them, though with difficulty ; and after a strong guard had been posted round the house, the others withdrew that all might be done according to the custom of the Tribes.

In the morning the elders consulted. After hearing Hafiz Ali, and also two men of the House of Kadir Shah, whom Kadir Shah had instructed from the window of his house, they not being allowed to enter and he refusing to come out, the elders declared that Asaf Khan must die. Coming in a body, accompanied by a great crowd of armed men, they demanded that Kadir Shah should cast Asaf Khan out of his dwelling, or open the gate so that Asaf Khan might be brought out and slain according to the decree of the council.

But neither of these things would Kadir Shah do.

“ Who are ye, ye small men of Kai, to condemn the great Asaf Khan ! ” he said contemptuously. “ Even if he be to blame in this matter, is his life

not worth ten of such as those he slew ? Is his life to be forfeit for a paltry two ! ”

“ On thy head be it then ! ” cried the speaker, as the elders stood before the house. “ Even the men of thy House, save only those that be within, say that this man should die. Send forth the man, or let us enter and take him ; else will thy house be attacked and all within it destroyed ! ”

Why Asaf Khan pressed the trigger of his rifle at that moment, it is hard to say. Perhaps it was an accident ; perhaps it was the blood hunger. Press it he did, and the speaker fell dead.

A howl of fury burst from the crowd that had accompanied the elders ; and in five minutes every man who possessed a gun was pumping lead as fast as he could load, into the doors and windows of Kadir Shah's house.

The besieged were not slow in returning the compliment ; and because the crowd was in the open, while the others fired through loopholes, the attack had barely begun ere a dozen men of Kai had fired their last shot on earth. Realizing their mistake, they hastily sought cover, whence they kept up a steady fire on the house, aiming at loopholes and cracks in the door and windows. Many, exposing themselves rashly in their excitement, were slain. But they persevered, for they knew that in the end numbers must prevail.

And so it was all day. And within the house, first Kadir Shah fell and died, and presently a son ; for there were many cracks that let a bullet through. In the afternoon another son of Kadir Shah fell and died, and towards evening Asaf Khan's son came to him and craved permission to speak.

“Speak, my son,” said Asaf Khan, without removing his cheek from the rifle into the breech of which he had just slipped a fresh cartridge.

“The last of thy brothers is slain, O my father,” replied the boy, “and now are we two alone.”

“Art afraid?”

“Afraid! I?” The boy drew himself up proudly with a look that made Asaf Khan chuckle.

“Thou art a true son of the Border,” he said, “and thou hast fought as a man this day.”

“If as a man I have fought,” said the boy proudly, “as a man I can die, so let them come!”

“Die?” scoffed Asaf Khan. “We shall not die! Even the beasts that live in holes have a second door, and have not Kadir Shah and his sons more sense than beasts? There is an outlet, my son, that leads from the chamber beneath the floor; and this outlet leads to the hillside. Kadir Shah and his sons knew of it, but none else of his House. Because the house was closely guarded last night we could not escape, nor could we escape during the day; but when dusk comes, thou and I, my son, will escape that way. Before those fools outside know that we are gone, we shall be miles away, and across the Border. Go now to thy loophole, for it is not yet time.”

Thus it came to pass, that when the people of Kai made a sudden attack in the middle of the night, their fire was not returned. Gaining confidence, they broke down the gate of the courtyard. Still none fired from the house; so they broke in the door and entered. And when they entered, they found the bodies of Kadir Shah and three of his sons. Also they found the two wives of Asaf Khan, whom they

took and slew, and other women whom they harmed not but sent to the homes of their fathers.

But Asaf Khan and his son they found not ; but pinned to the door with a dagger they found a paper with writing on it ; and taking this to the Mullah, he being a learned man read the writing to them.

“Men of Kai. I, Asaf Khan, have gone, and there is mourning among ye for those I have slain. But I shall return ; and at my coming, the mourning shall be greater than at my leaving.”

They searched the house, the village, and the surrounding hills for many days ; but Asaf Khan and his son they found not, for they two were at Jamrud:



CHAPTER III

HOW ASAF KHAN MADE A FRIEND

ASAF KHAN left his son with a friend in Peshawar, and returned to Jamrud ; but having missed the train, and there being no other till next morning, he had to walk and so arrived late. The Hindustani stationmaster hated Asaf Khan because the Pathan would not salaam to him ; and yet, because he knew that as long as Asaf Khan was chaukidar at Jamrud the property that lay at the station would be safe, he would not dismiss him. Now that Asaf Khan came late, he screamed at him and threatened to fine him. Asaf Khan replied not, but he scowled at the stationmaster and frightened him.

That night, Asaf Khan, Pathan, sat in his hut. He thought of many things ; and taking from the hole in which he kept it concealed his beloved Afghan knife, he began to polish the blade, for the knife of the Pathan is above all things dear to his heart.

Now, the Hindustani stationmaster, seeing a light in the hut, came softly and peeped in ; for he thought, perhaps, Asaf Khan was counting his money. If

so, he would see where the man hid it, and to-morrow he would send Asaf Khan to Peshawar, and in his absence take the money. Instead of counting money, Asaf Khan was polishing a great Afghan knife, perhaps to kill him, the stationmaster, with ; for he remembered the look Asaf Khan had given him a short time before. Also he thought of the number of times he had fined Asaf Khan, and he ran from the door.

Hearing the noise, Asaf Khan came out of the hut, the knife still in his hand ; and when the stationmaster glanced back and saw Asaf Khan coming after him, as he thought to kill him, he fled into the office, bolted the door, and sent telegrams furiously to Peshawar, to Rawalpindi, and to Lahore. Also he telephoned up to the fort for troops.

Asaf Khan stepped back into the hut, and replaced the knife in the hole. After covering it carefully, he made his way to the office door ; and knocking on it, asked what the matter was ; for he did not know that the stationmaster had seen the knife. But when the stationmaster heard his voice, instead of replying, he screamed louder and sent more telegrams, shouting to the fort to send help speedily, as the man was trying to break in the office door. The rest of the staff, when they heard the stationmaster screaming, bolted their door ; for, "Asaf Khan has become Ghazi !" they said. "He will kill us if we do not hide !"

In the midst of the commotion two officers came on the platform. They were passing the station on their way to the fort and, attracted by the disturbance, they came and asked Asaf Khan the meaning, for they had seen the stationmaster run screaming into

the office, but could not see from whom he ran. As Asaf Khan did not know any more than the officers, but thought the stationmaster must have gone mad, or was possessed of a devil, the officers, after staring for a while at the office door, told Asaf Khan to guide them to the gate of the fort as they did not know their way in the darkness.

Asaf Khan accompanied them, and on the way they met some Sikh soldiers. The sergeant in charge of the party, seeing the officers, saluted them and asked them if they knew why the soldiers had been sent for. The mystified officers laughed and declared they did not know, so the soldiers went on to the station where they found all the doors locked and no one visible. Seeing a light through the glass in the office door, the sergeant knocked, which started the stationmaster screaming again, sending fresh telegrams, and telephoning anew to the fort for help. The sergeant desisted, and getting to the other side, stood so that the light that shone through the window, the shutters of which had not been closed, fell upon him. Seeing the uniform, the stationmaster came to the window, and seeing the other soldiers, he opened the door ; but even then he would not come out till they had searched the whole of the station and told him the man had gone.

As the soldiers finished their search, an engine arrived from Peshawar with a European officer and a posse of policemen to arrest the Ghazi, so the soldiers returned to the fort and the policemen searched the station afresh. They, also, found no one, so returned to the office, and Asaf Khan came with them. He had seen the officers to the gate of the fort, and came back in time to walk with the policemen to the office.

The stationmaster saw him, and with a scream made a dive for the office door, crashing into the police officer who was just coming out, and sending him sprawling over the office table, which upset so that the officer fell hard on his head. Dashing to the corner, the stationmaster tried to get into a large stationery box, and as there was not sufficient room, he began frantically to empty it, pulling out papers and books, and throwing them about the room. The whole time he kept up a wail of, "Oh! your Honour! Save me! I am a miserable wretch, your Honour! Save me, your Honour!"

"You infernal idiot!" cried the officer, scrambling furiously to his feet. "I've a good mind to give you a jolly good kicking!" and striding across to where the stationmaster was bending over the box, he caught him by the neck and shook him. "Answer me, you little rat! Why did you rush in like that?"

"Oh! your Honour! He has returned, your Honour!" whimpered the man.

"Returned?" said the bewildered officer. "Where?"

"There, your Honour! You can see him through the door, your Honour!" and again he began, "Oh, your Honour! Save me, your Honour! I am a miserable ma——"

"You're a miserable coward!" interrupted the officer throwing the trembling wretch aside and stepping to the office door.

The only ones he could see, for they stood in the light which streamed through the office door, were his policemen and Asaf Khan.

"Is there anyone else on the platform?" he inquired sharply.

“No, sahib,” replied the sergeant. “Only we police and this chaukidar.”

“Handcuff the chaukidar,” ordered the officer; for it is not good to hesitate in these matters at Peshawar. It is much better to handcuff the hands of the wrong man than to leave the hands of the right man at liberty a second too long. Handcuffs can be taken off; but the hole made by an Afghan knife is not easily mended.

“Search him!” and swift hands searched Asaf Khan from head to foot, but found nothing.

“He bears no weapon, sahib,” reported the sergeant.

The officer stepped out on the platform. “Bring that beast of a stationmaster here! And if he doesn’t come sharp, kick him here!” for the officer had not yet recovered from his undignified sprawl over the office table. Also a lump was rising on the top of his head.

Two policemen appeared presently, dragging the unwilling stationmaster between them, but when he saw that Asaf Khan was safely guarded and handcuffed, the stationmaster became quite brave. Settling his clothes, he began to abuse the other volubly in Hindustani.

“Stop that row at once!” commanded the officer. “Is that the man?”

“Yess, that is thee man!” cried the stationmaster. “That is the ruffian who would to kill me! Tell to the policemen to hold him tight!”

“I will have you gagged if you make such an infernal row!” said the disgusted officer. “Now, what happened?” and he took out his note book. “Speak in Hindustani.”

“This man attacked me with a knife, Huzoor; a great big Afghan knife, Huzoor,” replied the station-master. “I was walking outside for the sake of coolness, Huzoor; and but that I saw him as he crept up behind me, Huzoor, he would have slain me! And then I fled!” continued the man breathlessly, “and he ran after me; so I ran into the office and bolted the door. He tried to break down the door, Huzoor, and kept calling me to come out and be killed else he would burn down the place and roast me, Huzoor. And when I would not come out, and he could not break in, Huzoor, he went away, Huzoor; and when he saw the soldiers and police, he hid his knife and returned. And every word I say is the truth, Huzoor, and the man’s words are a pack of lies. And if he says——”

“Shut up! you idiot!” shouted the officer. “The man has not opened his mouth. Did anyone else see him?”

Then the staff, who had crept out of their hiding places and were now standing round, told what they knew. One had seen Asaf Khan chasing the station-master with a great Afghan knife. Another had seen him trying to break down the office door; and a third swore that Asaf Khan tried to break down his door. He knew it was Asaf Khan, for he recognized his voice. And so on. Every man of the staff had either seen something or heard something; for each wished to go to Peshawar as a witness and get witness’s fees.

The officer took notes of all they said, and when they had finished, he turned to Asaf Khan.

“This is a serious charge, my man,” he said, “more especially you being a chaukidar. It will mean a

life sentence for you if these men stick to their statements. What have you to say ? ”

Asaf Khan stood motionless. That he, Asaf Khan, should be handcuffed while that spawn of the devil abused him and told lies about him ! It was intolerable ! What was that the officer said ? That he would go to prison for life for attempted murder ? Nay ! He would be hanged for the real thing ! With a violent twist he sent the policemen who were holding him staggering away, and with a bound he was on the stationmaster. Dashing his handcuffs into the man's face, Asaf Khan felled him to the ground ; and as with a shrill scream of deadly fear he fell, Asaf Khan fell on him and buried his teeth in his throat.

They had to beat Asaf Khan senseless with their batons before they could get him off, and even then his jaws had to be forced apart ere they could release the half dead stationmaster, whom they immediately took to the hospital at Peshawar.

Asaf Khan also they took to Peshawar ; but him they put in prison where he sat and brooded all day because he had tried to kill the stationmaster and had failed. And because he was in prison, and because he had failed to kill the man he tried to kill, he was ashamed, and sent word to no man, not even to his son .

Also no barrister-at-law came near him, neither any wakil ; for they thought him an ordinary chaukidar, a man without money, and Asaf Khan, knowing nothing of courts and the customs thereof, sent for none, but sat brooding alone.

Now it chanced that in Peshawar Asaf Khan had a friend, an Englishman, a major in the army ;

for before he went to his home to make peace between his father's House and the House of Wazir Ali, he had met this Englishman at Jamrud and had spoken to him. The Englishman had talked with him of the Border, and had asked Asaf Khan to come to Peshawar and teach him to speak Pusto as the Border folk spoke it, not as the munshi in Peshawar taught.

Because this was a Man and a Warrior, Asaf Khan consented to teach him ; and every day when he was on night duty he went to Peshawar and taught the Englishman to speak Pusto as the Border folk spoke it. And it came to pass that the heart of Asaf Khan inclined towards the Englishman, and he loved him as a brother. So much did he love him, that he even spoke to him of the maiden, the only being on earth save his son, that he had ever loved.

Now, this Englishman was a painter, and of shrewd wit. Listering to Asaf Khan's words, he made a picture of this maiden in his mind ; and afterwards, while Asaf Khan was at his home, he put this picture cunningly on ivory, and waited for Asaf Khan to return.

When the three months was up, and Asaf Khan came not to see him, Major Markham, as the Englishman was named, rode out to see him and to give him the picture on ivory.

It was the day of the trial ; and when Major Markham arrived at Jamrud, to his surprise he found strangers, for the regular staff were all away at Peshawar earning witnesses' fees. When he asked for Asaf Khan, they stared at him till he became angry ; and then the relieving stationmaster told him that Asaf Khan had tried to kill the stationmaster and

the whole staff, and was that day being tried in Peshawar.

Major Markham ran to his horse ; but the coolie who was holding it was so afraid when he saw the sahib's face, that he let go the horse ; and Major Markham knew it would not stop till it reached its stables.

Without a word he turned and raced to the fort, where he found the two officers to whom Asaf Khan had shown the way that night.

"For God's sake lend me a horse !" he cried. "Mine has bolted, and I must get back to Peshawar at once. It is a matter of life and death !" and while the syce (groom) was saddling the horse, he told them what he had just heard.

"But that's all rot !" said one of the officers. "Asaf Khan was the man who showed us to the fort the night the stationmaster went mad and telephoned up here for troops. We were on the platform the whole time. There is some devilment here. Bearer ! Order two more horses to be saddled ! We will accompany you, major, and see this thing through. Fortunately we were relieved to-day, and were returning to Peshawar after lunch."

In the court that day, after the stationmaster had told the judge the same tale he had told the police officer, and the rest of the staff had earned their witnesses' fees, the police officer told how he arrived at Jamrud, to find the place locked up and everyone hiding in terror. Then he told how the stationmaster tried to hide in the stationery box, which made the people laugh. Even the judge was compelled to smile, though he called the court sternly to order the next moment. But the police officer

said nothing of how the stationmaster had sent him sprawling over the office table. Then he told how the stationmaster had pointed out Asaf Khan as the assassin, and of the attack Asaf Khan made on the stationmaster after the arrest.

The judge looked grave, and turning to Asaf Khan, asked him if he had aught to say.

Ay ! Indeed, Asaf Khan had something he would say ! He was about to ask the judge not to imprison him for life, but to give him freedom for five minutes and then hang him for killing the stationmaster ; but as he straightened himself and opened his mouth to speak the door at the end of the room burst open, and three military officers covered with dust entered, and the first was Asaf Khan's friend, the Englishman.

Everyone stared at them ; but Asaf Khan turned away his head, and tried to hide his hands behind the rail of the dock. Major Markham strode up the room.

" Is this the case of Emperor *versus* Asaf Khan ? " he asked ; and when told it was : " Has the accused a barrister ? " he asked ; and he had not. " Will you take the case ? " turning to a barrister present.

" With pleasure," was the reply ; and then the voice of the judge cut through the air.

" Are you aware, Major Markham, that this is most irregular ? " he asked coldly.

" I am," replied the major coolly, " but better a slight irregularity than a grave miscarriage of justice."

When the barrister took the case in hand, it wore a very different aspect. The two officers gave evidence as witnesses for the defence—without demanding witnesses' fees—and when the stationmaster was recalled and cross-examined, the barrister tore his

statement to rags, and showed him as the liar he was. The other witnesses also broke down, and the barrister asked that the accused be acquitted.

There was the matter of the attack on the stationmaster after the arrest ; but the police officer said he would ask the stationmaster if he wished to press that charge. Now, the police officer was still annoyed over the matter of the office table, and was furious with the stationmaster for making him believe his falsehoods, so this is the way he asked. It is not the usual way, but it is the way the police officer asked the stationmaster.

“ You infernal liar ! ” he said, “ I’ve a jolly good mind to break your neck ! The judge wants to know if you are going to press the charge against the man for attacking you after he was arrested. You had better say no, or I’ll run you in for perjury and conspiracy ! ”

As the stationmaster did not wish to press the charge, the judge said the prisoner was acquitted ; but he must be bound over to keep the peace for a year, and must find a surety.

“ I will be surety,” said Major Markham. “ Do you understand ? ” he continued to Asaf Khan. “ You must promise not to interfere with the stationmaster for a year.”

Major Markham gazed at Asaf Khan, and Asaf Khan gazed at Major Markham. Asaf Khan would have refused, for he meant to kill the stationmaster ; but when he opened his mouth to refuse, he found with those eyes upon him he could not ; so he shut his lips tight and spoke not at all. Matters appeared to be at a deadlock ; but after they had waited for a while, and still Asaf Khan did not promise, Major

Markham asked if he could send up a note to the accused.

“ Really, Major Markham,” complained the judge hesitatingly, “ this is most irregular.” But because the judge hesitated, Major Markham gave a small box to an attendant, and bade him give it to Asaf Khan.

In the box was the miniature Major Markham had painted on ivory ; so that when the box was given to Asaf Khan and he opened it, behold ! the face of his dead love smiled up at him ! For a while he gazed at it in silence, but presently, looking across to where Major Markham stood, he made this friend who could read the heart of a friend, a low salaam. Turning to the judge, Asaf Khan drew himself up to his full height.

“ I, Asaf Khan, Pathan of the Tribe of the Afridis, swear on the Holy Koran that for a year and a day I will not molest the man.”

CHAPTER IV

HOW ASAF KHAN LOVED AND RODE AWAY

NOW this tale of which I am about to tell came to pass in the days of Asaf Khan's youth, when his blood was hot, and the swing of a boorkha ever made his pulse beat the faster. In the country of the Mahsuds the matter had its beginning, and in this wise did it come to pass.

Though often pressed by his father Kadir Shah, not yet had Asaf Khan taken to himself a wife ; which was a great scandal to his House, he being of an age when many men have two, even three wives. But to all their reproaches Asaf Khan turned a deaf ear, or made reply that he wanted no wife like the women of that land.

“ What then did he want ? ” asked his father, but Asaf Khan would not say. Even to himself he scarce confessed that which was in his heart, least of all to his father who would laugh at his wild imaginings. For Asaf Khan's soul had been fired by tales of ancient days, and it was not alone a mother of sons he sought, but a mate who would be one with him in thought and love.

But what hope for him in a land where the boorkha hid all that was fairest, and where the maidens of the Houses into which alone he might wed, were not to be seen of men. He had heard that in Hindustan women were often seen unveiled; but a woman of Hindustan would be no fit mate for a son of the wild Border.

Still he would not wed; till at last, impatient at the continued entreaties of his father, he left his home for a space, intending to wander till such time as he found the bride of his heart, or, the fires of youth tamed, he would be willing to accept a wife at his father's hands.

And first he went to the country of the Mahsuds, meaning to travel still further south till he reached the great sea of which he had heard tales. By Hindustan could he have gone, but he would have been compelled to travel in the fire carriages of the English, else could he not have crossed the great desert that lay between; and in the fire carriages he would not travel. They smelt of witchcraft and the evil one, for he had seen them afar in Kohat, and he doubted if even the talisman the Mullah had given him to wear round his neck would avail against a power that could hurl carriages along as fast as the wind blows. He would go by way of the mountains, and would have but a small stretch of the desert to cross ere reaching the sea.

Now, it chanced that in the village where he first stayed to rest, there dwelt a man whose daughter was of a marriageable age, but for whom he had not yet found a suitable husband. Who so suitable as this Asaf Khan, who had come to the village? For though hardly yet a man,

the fame of Asaf Khan had already gone forth on the Border.

With many words of kindness did this man, Jan Mohamed by name, seek Asaf Khan in the mussafir khana and press him to take up his abode with him as long as he should remain in the village. Not being then well-versed in the ways of men, Asaf Khan gave ear to the man, though he was a Mahsud, and consented to dwell in his house.

Then did the man plan a scheme whereby he might compel Asaf Khan to wed his daughter ; for one who had been to Asaf Khan's village told him how the youth refused to wed, and he knew that only by a trick might this thing be done. But first he spoke to his daughter, telling her what a famous warrior Asaf Khan already was, and how much more famous he was likely to be—if some enemy shot him not in the back, though of this he did not speak to the maiden. Then he showed her Asaf Khan walking in the courtyard, and the maiden's heart was filled with love. Willingly she agreed to all her father would have her do, and to her he unfolded his plan.

Little did Asaf Khan, as he sat at meat with the man that evening, think of the treachery that had been planned that day ; and had his fortunate planet not been in the ascendant at that time, he would surely have been wed, however much he might dislike the thought. But the man and his daughter, though they knew it not, were not alone when they talked ; and to this Asaf Khan owed his escape from the net that had been spread for his unconscious feet.

In the same village there dwelt a young man. Handsome was he, and in the eyes of the maidens he found favour. But in the eyes of the maiden

whom he loved he found no favour ; and she was the maiden whose father would marry her to Asaf Khan. Often had the youth waited near the path leading to the well, hoping the fair one would relent and drop a portion of her veil for an instant, thus allowing him a glimpse of the face he loved, and also giving him the sign well known to lovers. But his hopes were vain. With a toss of her head she passed him, drawing her veil even tighter about her face. Many presents did he send by the hand of one of her maidservants, fruit both fresh and dry, trinkets such as girls love, silk which he bought from a man who had been to Kabul ; but all she returned. Nor could the maidservant give him any comfort or hope. And then came Asaf Khan to the village.

At dusk, the young man who loved the maiden sat beneath a tree on the outskirts of the village, playing sad melodies on his reed flute, and mourning the hard heart of his love ; and to him came the maidservant in haste. It was news she brought, news that made the young man beat his breast and rend his garments ; for she had overheard the plan that was made that day, and the young man's heart was filled with woe. He could betray the plan, but then must he give up all thoughts of having the maiden to wife, for neither she nor her father would ever forgive him. Yet if he remained silent and did naught, in a day would she be the bride of another.

But this maidservant was full of guile, else had she never learned the plan. In her mistress's chamber were many curtains, and oft would she hide behind one, listening to what the others spoke of, they knowing not of her presence. Many were the things she

learned in this way, and many were the presents she received to dismiss from her memory an indiscreet utterance she had overheard. And hidden behind a curtain, she had heard what the man said to his daughter.

Bidding the young man cease his lamentations, she unfolded her mind to him, showing that what appeared the greatest misfortune, was in sooth great good fortune ; for if he paid heed to what she said, not only would the father's plans miscarry, but the young man would win his bride.

For long they talked, and at dusk came one to the courtyard of Jan Mohamed's house seeking speech with Asaf Khan. He was a young man, Ibrahim by name, and Asaf Khan knew him not ; but the young man had heard much of Asaf Khan, the great Asaf Khan, and Asaf Khan, who was not yet used to the flattery of men, felt his heart warm to the young man, and talked much. So long talked they, that the father of the maiden grew impatient ; for the hour grew late, and what he would do must be done before the village slept. At last he spoke, upbraiding the young man for his thoughtlessness in thus keeping a weary traveller from his rest ; and the young man left. But he craved Asaf Khan to accompany him a little way, and to this Asaf Khan consenting, they left the courtyard.

Then did the young man tell Asaf Khan of the danger that threatened him, and Asaf Khan's heart was filled with rage against this treacherous host. In haste would he have returned and reproached the man, perhaps have slain him ; but the young man entreated him, and then told him the plan of the maidservant,

Asaf Khan smiled. It was good. The hunters had dug a pit into which they would themselves fall. He looked curiously at the young man who would wed such a maiden in such a way. But love, so he had heard, saw no wrong in the loved one, and he held his peace.

The man was waiting for him when he returned, and conducted him to an inner chamber, saying he could sleep there that night ; and Asaf Khan smiled in his beard, for it was a woman's chamber.

“ Of a truth, my friend, thy house is richly furnished within,” he said. “ In few houses are the men's rooms thus. This is more fitted for a dainty maiden than for a rough man like me ! ”

In some confusion, for Asaf Khan's talk of maidens alarmed him, the man explained that it was a room he kept reserved for guests to whom he wished to show especial honour ; and hiding another smile behind his hand, Asaf Khan thanked him for his courtesy.

Just then came one to the door, a servant, with a message from one in the village craving Jan Mohamed's presence for an hour ; and bidding Asaf Khan sleep well and so be strong for the morrow's journey, the man, Jan Mohamed, would have left him there. But this, Asaf Khan would by no means have. Accompanying his host to the gate of the courtyard, he saw him on his way and then returned within. Not into the house where it was dark did he enter, but stood under the stars in the courtyard watching the wall.

At last that for which he looked appeared. A head showed above the wall, and a figure climbed over, dropping noiselessly within in the shade of a

plum tree that grew near the wall. Asaf Khan also went there, and for a while there were two figures under the plum tree ; but presently there was only one, and Asaf Khan was alone.

Half an hour passed, and then from without came the sound of many feet. They reached the gate, and a number of men entered the courtyard, the man Jan Mohamed at their head.

“ And thus it was,” he was saying. “ Little thought I when I admitted him to my house that he would bewitch my daughter. Little thought I when first I missed him from the chamber to which I had led him, that I would find him in my daughter’s chamber, that daughter willing ! Softly I peeped in and beheld them, and then hurried for help. Alone I could do naught, for he would have slain me and fled ; but now he shall wed the maiden, or die ! Unhappy father ! Unhappy daughter ! ”

By this time they had reached the door, and as they entered, Asaf Khan followed. Pointing out a room to the left as the one he had given to Asaf Khan, the man led the way further into the house, bidding them step softly for they approached the room of shame, his daughter’s chamber.

There was silence within, and the man crept to the door, the others following, stroking their beards and handling their knives ; for if this man who had dishonoured their village refused to wed the maid, they would slay him. Even had they brought the Mullah with them, that this Asaf Khan should not leave the room save as the husband of the maiden he had bewitched.

Suddenly the father burst open the door and rushed within, the rest almost tumbling over each other

in their eagerness to follow ; for though their beards were grey, they did not wish to miss what the first opening of the door might disclose.

There was little to see. A man stood with his back to the door, a man wearing Asaf Khan's posteen (fur coat) ; and near the further wall cowered the maiden. She may have just sprung from the arms of her lover, or she may have just slipped from behind a curtain. A small lamp burned in a corner, but the lantern the father carried lit up the whole room, showing the two figures and the couch from which the man appeared to have just risen.

"Behold !" and the frantic father waved the lantern wildly. "Behold the traitor ! Villain ! Thou shalt wed the maiden thou hast betrayed ! Ho ! Mullah ! Prepare to perform thine office, for only as this maiden's wedded man shall he go forth from this room !"

Then the man turned, and it was not Asaf Khan, but the young man, Ibrahim, the lover of the maiden.

"The maiden called me and I came," he said. "I came thinking the father asleep, but he seems to be much awake. Perhaps he expected some such thing," and he glanced at Asaf Khan who had entered the room and stood smiling at his host. "I am willing to wed the maid," continued the young man, "for maid she still is, and as I would have wronged the father, I will even take her without dowry."

Without dowry ! Truly this was a son-in-law worth having ! And the chagrined father had to listen with what patience he possessed to the congratulations of his friends on his good fortune.

There was no way out of it. He had brought these men, thinking to have them as witnesses against

Asaf Khan, and lo ! with them as witnesses to the shame of his House, he must wed his daughter to this young man to whom he had refused her more than once.

But the Mullah was there, the men were impatient to return to their homes, and the maiden was wedded then and there to the young man Ibrahim who had loved her so long.

Asaf Khan left with the rest, and that night he slept in the mussafir khana, but the next day he left, for this place where men tried to trick folk into marriage was no place for him.

But before he left he went to the house of Jan Mohamed.

“ Bid me Godspeed, O Jan Mohamed, most honourable of hosts ! ” he cried mockingly. “ Fool ! ” his voice grew harsh and his face dark. “ Would’st mate a lion with a sheep ? I am Asaf Khan ! Know, O Jan Mohamed, that ere I would wed thy daughter, I would slay every man of thy House ! Ay, of thy village ! Did’st think I had only a knife ? See ! ” and whipping from his waistcloth a revolver, he pointed it at the now trembling man. “ Five lives had I here, and see further ! ”—pulling out a bag and pouring a score of cartridges into his hand—“ a score of lives here ! ” Then he laughed. “ Sheep mates with sheep, O Jan Mohamed ; but lion mates only with lion ! I mate not among the Mahsuds, I seek my bride in the land of Men ! ” and with a parting wave of his hand he left.

* * * * *

For three years did Asaf Khan wander thus, and many adventures had he, both of love and of war.

Many women loved him, and a few he loved in return ; not with the love of the inner heart, but with the love of an hour that tires with the hour. Of war he had his full share, and ever his fame grew on the Border ; for when his money was gone, he would join himself to some raiding party. Thus he gained both fame and wealth ; for the forays he led were ever successful, bringing back much plunder, and his share he would turn into money and precious stones, which being light, could be easily carried.

At last, after three years, came Asaf Khan to the land of the Orakzai, and here he heard a strange thing, stranger than anything he had yet heard.

A Khan, a rich Khan, had an only child, a daughter. Many Khans have daughters, but surely never before had Khan daughter such as this, if all that men told of her were true. No secluded maiden this, hidden from the eyes of men in the zenana, busying herself with the gentle tasks of her sex, the threading of beads and the embroidering of silks. This maiden dwelt not in the zenana, but in a room near her father ; and she walked among men unashamed, scorning the boorkha. Eighteen years had she lived, and yet she was unwed ; and for this men gave many reasons.

Some said she was hard-faced, and so like a man that none would woo her. Others said no decent man would wed a maid whose face all men had seen. But most said she was beautiful. Not as the houris are beautiful, for theirs is a soft womanly beauty, while the maiden's beauty was of another sort. Even as the storm was she beautiful, when the wind lashes the rain against the hillside and the thunder rolls, while the moon, tearing rents in the black

clouds, casts through the gaps shafts of cold, silvery splendour that make the blackness of the clouds more black. Or like the snow mountain was she, soaring in fierce majesty through tier upon tier of unscaleable rock to the summit that floats above, dazzling white, and pure as the sky that caresses it. Cold she was, and no man had yet found favour in her eyes, much less touched her heart.

This was passing strange, and it came into Asaf Khan's mind that he would go and see this maiden. Perchance she might be the one he sought, for such a woman would be not only a fit mate for a warrior, she would also be the mother of warriors, warriors it may be even greater than Asaf Khan, and into the land of the Orakzai he took his way.

It was evening when he reached the village where dwelt the maiden, and as the hour was late, he made his way to the mussafir khana, meaning there to pass the night. But one who knew Asaf Khan learned of his coming, and told the Khan in the hearing of the maiden. She, curious to see this renowned warrior, begged her father to let the man be their guest while he dwelt in the village.

A message was sent; but Asaf Khan sent word in return, that since the day when in the country of the Mahsuds he had dwelt in the house of a man with an unwedded daughter, he had sworn never again to dwell in such a house. This message puzzled the maiden greatly, till her father, who knew the story, laughed and told her how Asaf Khan was nearly wed against his will.

Then was the maiden wroth, and vowed that Asaf Khan should rue the day he sent that message; but dissembling her anger, she smiling bade the man

tell Asaf Khan to come early, as she wished to see if the spirit of so great a warrior were in a fit setting.

In the morning went Asaf Khan to the house of the Khan, and found the maiden seated near her sire. Beautiful indeed was she, but with a beauty not often seen in women. As the lioness is beautiful, as the lightning is beautiful, so was her beauty; and the heart of Asaf Khan inclined towards her. But not yet would he show it. The outside was good, but the heart within he would first know. Many a brave form hides a coward heart; and the wife he wed must be in all things fit for the high destiny he would offer her. For in those days Asaf Khan, his head full of the olden days, had many dreams. Men had carved out empires for themselves before his day, why should he not do likewise?

Tall was the maiden, and stately as the pine that grows on the higher mountains. Soft was her voice as the wind whispering through the needles of the pine, and fragrant was she, with the fragrance of the pine's sap. Lithe as the panther was she, straight of limb, and with the swelling bosom and broad hips that belong only to the mothers of Men.

Her garments were not the garments of a woman, nor yet were they the clothes of a man. While serving to hide her form, they yet allowed freedom of movement to every limb, and though she wore a woman's cloth upon her head, her ebon locks were not braided back as is the custom of women, but were caught up in a loose coil behind, so that many tresses escaped and nestled in loving curls about her cheek and neck.

The more Asaf Khan looked at her, the more he desired her; but he hid his feelings and talked about other matters. Of the raids he had led. Of the

sudden attack at night, or the fierce skirmish by day. Of the lands through which he had passed. And sometimes he spoke of the maidens who had sought his love ; for in that land to speak of such things is accounted no shame.

Always he watched the maiden while he talked. And when he spoke of other countries, a far off look would come into her eyes, as if she, too, would wander the world. When he spoke of war and the killing of men, then would her eyes kindle and her beauty become the beauty of a devouring tempest. But when he spoke of love, she sighed. And sometimes she glanced swiftly at him, and sometimes, with downcast eyes, she played with the fringe of her garment.

The Khan marked these things ; and when he escorted Asaf Khan to the gate of the courtyard, as was the due of an honoured guest, he smote Asaf Khan on the back.

“ Three years hast thou wandered,” he said with a great laugh, “ art yet ready for a wife ? If so, methinks thou wilt not have far to seek one willing.”

Asaf Khan knew well what the Khan meant, and also he had marked the maiden when he talked of love ; but he was not yet ready, and he strode off with a laugh.

And so the days passed. Asaf Khan would go to the Khan’s house, and first he would talk of countries. Then he would talk of war. And lastly he would talk of love. Always the maiden was there, and always she dropped her eyes when he talked of love ; but still Asaf Khan was not ready. He now desired her greatly, but wished that she should desire

him more, for thus should it always be, lest the woman hold the man cheap.

At last was a day when the Khan came not to the room, and Asaf Khan met the maiden alone. He would have withdrawn, for hardly was he accustomed to talking to an unveiled maiden, and lo ! he must talk to one, not only unveiled, but alone ! But the maiden bade him stay, while the warm colour mounted to her cheeks, and Asaf Khan stayed.

Asaf Khan knew not that it was at the maiden's request the Khan stayed away, but so it was. Judging the time ripe, and Asaf Khan prepared to do as she wished, she asked her father to leave them together for an hour, posting her maidens in an adjoining room so that she should not be alone with the man.

For a time they talked idly, and as before, when Asaf Khan talked of love, the maiden sat with down-cast eyes, only stealing an occasional glance at him. But presently her mood changed, and though she did not look openly at him, when their glances met she did not at once turn her head, but for a moment let their glances mingle. And the fire in her eyes went to Asaf Khan's head as new wine goes to the head of the unbeliever, so that presently he started up. She rose also, and as she rose, Asaf Khan strode to her and grasped her by the shoulders.

"Thou shalt be my wife," he said, "for thou art fit to be a warrior's bride. Also my heart inclines towards thee, and with me shalt thou wed."

To his surprise, the maiden drew back and with swift turn released herself.

"What !" she cried ; and the light in her eyes

was no longer the soft light of love, but the light of mockery and scorn. "Thou would'st wed with me? Nay, my lord does this humble maiden too much honour! Come, my maidens. The great Asaf Khan seeks thy poor mistress in marriage! Come and witness the truth of what I say!" and as the maidens came into the room, "He thinks he is still in the land of the Mahsuds, where the maidens are so anxious to marry that their fathers wed them to strangers by a trick! Know, vain boaster," and now her glance was like the lightning that plays about the hilltop when the storm rages fiercest, "I am not for thee! When I wed, I shall wed a man; not one who goes about belittling women, thinking he has but to ask and to have!" Then her mood changed, and the light of mockery again shone in her eyes and touched her lips with scorn. "Hast naught to say? Merry it was to play with thee and lead thee on to this, for know, Asaf Khan, this has been in my mind from the beginning, even from the day thou didst send thy message about the Mahsud maiden. Now go! And leave the village quickly, for I will surely tell this thing to-morrow. Go!"

Asaf Khan turned and stumbled from the room. When the maiden first began to speak, he thought she jested; but when her maidens entered he knew it was no jest, but bitter shame. He, Asaf Khan, was held up to scorn and made a mock of by a woman! At first he felt stunned, but then a great rage entered his heart, and he would have killed the woman, strangled her where she stood and mocked. But he was far from his own land, and many would there be to avenge her death. Scarcely could he escape,

and a woman was too light a thing for Asaf Khan to die for.

Drawing himself up he faced her, returning scorn for scorn, but at her last threat he flinched. She would tell, and all men would laugh at him ! In a week would the tale be carried to every part of the Border ; and he must live an exile. Never could he face men, knowing what they knew. Dearly would he have loved to put his hands round that white throat and hold until her face grew purple and bloated and her eyes started from their sockets, for now he hated her far more than he loved her before.

But life is dear and, turning, he staggered from the room like a drunken man. He must travel fast, and he must travel far. That evening he would seek a horse, and at dawn he would leave this cursed country where vile women made a mock of brave men. And as he left the room, the maiden laughed. Loud and long she laughed, and the sound of her laughter was in his ears until he passed through the gate of the courtyard.

Strange is the heart of a woman. The maiden had set out of purpose to do this thing, but now it was done she was not happy. How proudly he had borne this shame she had put upon his manhood ! How his looks had given back scorn for scorn, till she put that last shame upon him and threatened to tell ! She had called him vain boaster, but she knew he was a brave warrior, for was not his fame in the mouths of all men ! How his eyes had glowed when he spoke of war ! How tender his voice grew when he spoke of love ! Never would his voice be tender for her again. He would hate her, the maiden

who had put this shame upon his manhood. Never more would she see him. Never more ! And covering her face with her hands, she wept.

Her maidens gathered round her with little cries of pity and comfort ; but she drove them from her with harsh words, and going to her chamber, threw herself face downwards on her bed. There she wept ; but presently she dried her tears and wondered why she wept. The man had almost said that she and her father wished to do as the Mahsud maiden and her father had done, and he was justly punished. But how he must hate her now ! He who had loved her, thinking she loved him—thinking she loved—how dare he think she loved him ! She loved no man. She would love no man ! Not even if he were tall, and handsomer than any man on the Border ! Not even if his voice when he spoke of war was as a trumpet urging men to battle. Not even if his eyes and voice grew tender while he spoke of love ! Not even if— And now again she wept, for she knew. She loved a man, and the man was Asaf Khan, the man she had shamed as surely man was never shamed before.

For an hour she lay on her bed. And sometimes she sighed, and sometimes she wept, and sometimes she lay and thought of the love that had been hers and which she had cast away. Till presently there came to her an old woman who had nursed her as a babe, had watched over her budding girlhood, and who was now more friend than servant ; and to her, with many sighs and moans, the maiden opened her heart.

The old woman shook her head. “Thou hast done wrong to scorn a brave man’s love, daughter,” she

said gravely, "but be not so cast down. A strong man loves strongly, and his love is no light thing to be cast from his heart in an instant. Take comfort, my daughter, the man is still in the village I will see what I can do."

At dark a woman came to the mussafir khana. Wrapped in a boorkha was she, but not to hide her charms, for from her bent figure and her gait all men could see that she was old. Coming to the door of the room where Asaf Khan dwelt, she knocked; and when he opened she would have entered, but he barred the way.

"Begone!" he said. "No woman enters here!" for now he hated all women for the sake of the woman who had shamed him.

Since he would not admit her, the woman seated herself on the doorstep and poured out her tale. Her mistress was young, and the young were thoughtless.

Again Asaf Khan tried to drive her away, but she clung to the doorpost and continued. Already her mistress regretted what she had done. Her mistress wept, and only the forgiveness of Asaf Khan could comfort her. Her mistress had wept since Asaf Khan had left, driven away by her wicked words, and she was still weeping. Her mistress wished to see Asaf Khan again, and hear his tales of love, for his voice and his eyes were tender when he spoke of love. Perhaps Asaf Khan would teach her mistress what was this love of which he spoke. He could tell her of his love for her. Perchance she felt this love herself, but not knowing it for love, had thought it maiden foolishness. Perchance she even loved him. She thought she did. She knew

she did. Would Asaf Khan forgive her cruel words and let her tell him how she loved him ?

Asaf Khan listened in silence. At first his brow was dark, and more than once he strove to close the door ; but presently his face cleared, and at the end he smiled.

“ So ! ” he said grimly. “ When she could, she would not ; now she cannot, she would. Or seeks she to put fresh shame upon me ? ”

“ Nay,” replied the old woman. “ I have known my mistress from a babe, and this I tell thee ; never has man been loved as my mistress loves thee. Wed her, and she lives ; leave her, and she dies.”

Asaf Khan stood wrapped in thought till the old woman had three times asked for a message to bear her mistress, and at last he spoke. He would wed her mistress, he said, but the wedding must be at once. All the people of the village must be asked, and all the people of the surrounding villages ; that all might know it was Asaf Khan being wed. The next day the preparations must be made, and the day after, at dawn, he would wed the maid. But all must be done as he said, and the wedding must be at dawn, or he would not wed at all. Also he would see neither the Khan nor the maiden till the wedding morn. He asked no dowry with the bride.

A little of the maiden's spirit returned to her when she received Asaf Khan's masterful message ; but love speedily drove out all hard thoughts, and she was soon busily engaged with her maidens making all ready for the wedding morn. The Khan was pleased that his daughter would at last wed, more especially as the man she would wed was the redoubtable Asaf Khan, and though he grumbled at

the hurry and expense, he did all things as Asaf Khan had desired. Asaf Khan was a son-in-law to be proud of—and he asked no dowry.

Great were the preparations next day, and great was the crowd that assembled in the village the following night, eagerly waiting the dawn. Asaf Khan remained in his room, refusing to see any man, and though they thought it strange, he was Asaf Khan, and his wishes must not be crossed.

But at dawn they went to his room. The wedding, according to his wish, was to take place in the village, outside the mosque, and the bride and her father were already approaching the spot.

What was this! The door was shut! It was padlocked on the outside, so Asaf Khan could not be inside; where, then, was Asaf Khan? The lock was a common one, and as something might be learned by opening it, a key that fitted it was soon found.

The room was empty! Nay, not empty, for on the floor in the centre of the room lay a parcel done up in paper, and on it, in fair writing was, "From Asaf Khan to his bride."

Wondering greatly, they took the parcel to the Khan, who had now reached the mosque, and he handed it to his daughter, bidding her open it. With trembling fingers she undid the knots, unrolled the paper, and out fell—an old shoe!

What a commotion there was! What shouting! What laughter! What curses from the Khan! But the maiden said naught for a while, then,

"Be there men in this village who will ride with me?" she asked, "for I will have this man's blood."

Fast they rode, and far they rode, but never they

found Asaf Khan. For the horse he had bought was a good one and he spared it not, knowing that of a certainty the maiden would seek his life for the shame he had put upon her.

And one day Asaf Khan rode into his father's village and threw himself from his horse.

"Give me a wife," he said, "for I would have sons," and his father gave him two.

CHAPTER V

HOW ASAF KHAN LEARNED TO LOVE

FOR two years Asaf Khan dwelt in the house of his father with the two wives his father had given him that Asaf Khan might have a son. Two long, weary years, and yet there was no son. A daughter had been born, but to the joy of the House she died on the third day, for of what use is a daughter? She is a trouble and a curse; and moreover, the firstborn of Asaf Khan must be a son.

Still there came no son, nor could either of his wives give him hopes of one; and Asaf Khan was a-weary. Sending his wives back with papers of divorce and their dowries to the Houses whence they had come, he bade his father farewell, and with a good horse he had bought in the Orakzai country, he set off for the north.

To Afghanistan would he go; not to Kabul, but to the wilder parts, for there might a man see life. Always was one Khan at war with another, nor did they heed the Amir when he bade them cease their strife; for Kabul was afar, and if the Amir sent an army against them, they could unite till they had sent his army home to him like whipped curs; then they could again

settle their differences as their fathers had done without interference from the Amir.

That was the life for a man ! The life in this dull village, where the raids were petty and wives refused to bear sons, was fit only for cattle. He would hie him north, and there live as a man should live. Perchance he might slay some Khan and seize his land. He was a warrior. A great warrior ! Men, hearing his name, would flock to him, and he might even be a king !

And so he journeyed north. Many perils had he by the way, and oft was he in danger of his life ; but he won through, and at last came to a land that was fair in his sight. Green was the valley between the hills. Rich the waving fields of corn and the heavily burdened orchard. Fat and many were the cattle that grazed beside the stream ; and in his heart Asaf Khan made a vow that he would possess this land. First would he dispossess the Khan ; and then, when men heard he was there and came clamouring to him to lead them, he would go forth and would possess the whole country-side. After that—who knew ? The grandfather of the Amir had not been Amir. If the Durani House could become Amirs, could not the House of Asaf Khan ?

But the day grew on apace, and going to the village that nestled in the shadow of a fort wherein surely dwelt the Khan of this fair valley, Asaf Khan took up his abode in the mussafir khana, and after tending his horse, walked abroad to hear what men said.

First he asked of the Khan ; for were the Khan

beloved, then would his task be hard. It might be that he must go elsewhere. If the Khan were feared, he would stay ; for where the ruler is feared there are always discontented men who but wait for someone who fears not, to give trouble to that ruler.

This Khan, he found, was both beloved and feared. Beloved in that he took no man's goods or land, and molested the women of none. But he was feared for the sternness with which he punished even the slightest fault. Asaf Khan talked with men, learning much, and in the evening retired to his chamber to weigh the matter well.

Many loved the Khan, and to them it would be dangerous to speak aught against him. As many hated him ; for through fear of him they durst not do the evil that was in their hearts. Thus, there were as many for as against. But there were others left, men who neither feared nor loved him. They feared him not, for they sought to wrong no man ; but neither did they love him, for men are weak, and many of his punishments they thought harsh and severe. These were the men Asaf Khan must gain if he would oust the Khan and have the valley for his own.

One fault had the Khan ; he loved his ease overmuch. In his youth he had been a great warrior ; but now, though scarcely past middle age, he seldom led a foray. Nay, when neighbouring Khans raided his lands, he would oft-times take his ease at home while his men drove the invaders out ! And this did not please the people. Asaf Khan thought long that night and, ere he slept, he made up his mind what he would do.

Now, though Asaf Khan was known throughout the border, his fame had not reached thus far. Afghanistan is a great country, and a country of great warriors ; to be famous in Afghanistan one must indeed be a great warrior—and must also be of Afghanistan. For the people of Afghanistan look with scorn upon the men of other lands. More especially do they think little of the men of the Border ; for the English have been many times across the Border, and each time have the tribes rued their coming. But in Afghanistan it is otherwise. True, the English have been there ; but once they had cause to regret their coming, and though they fared better the other times they came, they could not stay ; and this was in the long ago. Let the English come now, said the Afghans, they would find they had not men of the Border to deal with !

Of this, Asaf Khan was glad ; for if the story of his fame had reached thus far, other stories might have reached also ; and some of the stories might have alarmed the Khan and put him on his guard. It was better thus, and in the morning he took his way to the Khan's house.

As he reached the gate of the fort, he found a great crowd without, and asking the reason, was told that the Khan would punish a man that day. This man had stolen another man's wife and had left the country ; but the woman being dead, he had returned, thinking his fault forgotten, or that he would be punished with a fine. But the Khan would have otherwise. Three days was the man confined, and then he was brought out for punishment ; and the punishment was this. Because he was a man, he had erred ; he should be

made no man, and then he would not err again in this way. Now Asaf Khan thought it a great shame that a man should be punished in this way for the sake of a woman ; and pushing his way through the crowd, he entered the courtyard of the fort.

There were few in the courtyard, the Khan, the man who must be punished, the barber who would inflict the punishment, and a dozen others. The Khan was a tall man, and strong ; but he was heavy, and inclined to stoutness, as is ever the fate of those who neglect the body and give way to sloth, and from him, Asaf Khan's gaze wandered to the man who stood bound. This was a proper man ! and Asaf Khan's eyes glowed at the sight. Slightly above the ordinary stature of a man, in breadth of shoulders he surpassed all present, even Asaf Khan. Great muscles stood out on his arms and legs, for his clothes had been removed, muscles that rippled with every movement he made. His face was homely, but the square jaw showed determination, and from the look in his eyes, Asaf Khan judged him as one who would be faithful unto death ; and Asaf Khan was no mean judge of men, he having wandered in many lands having dealings with many men.

The Khan looked round as Asaf Khan entered the courtyard, and he frowned at the sight of a stranger ; but Asaf Khan was nothing daunted. He had heard murmurs at the gate, and knew the people were angered at what the Khan would do ; if he could save the man, he would gain favour in the eyes of the people. But he must be wary, for he wished to gain favour in the eyes of the Khan also. He strode up to the Khan and stood before him.

The Khan eyed him for a moment, and then gruffly asked him who he was.

“Men know me as Asaf Khan,” was the reply. “From the Border I come, from the land of the Afridis ; and I come thus far to learn the trade of a warrior. On the Border, the men are of little spirit ; but in Afghanistan are great warriors, and when I asked for the greatest, men sent me to thee. But what has this man done, O Khan, that thy anger is thus heavy against him ? ”

Now, the Khan was pleased with Asaf Khan’s speech ; for who can resist the honeyed words of flattery ? The frown left his brow, and in friendly tones he told the man’s fault. Asaf Khan mused for a while ; though there was no need, for as he walked the length of the courtyard, he had made up his mind what he would do. Then he spoke, choosing his words carefully.

“The punishment is just,” he said, “but I wish it could be otherwise. And why not ? Thou art the Khan, and can’st do as thou wilt. Let it be thus, O Khan. Many men seek to be warriors who have not the strength to be a warrior. I also would be a warrior, and therefore have I come to learn of thee. Let me then show that in strength I am not wanting, and so prove myself worthy to be thy pupil. Let this man wrestle with me, and let the stake be this. If he win, he shall go free, and I shall return to my home. But if I win, then teach thou me to be a warrior even as thou art. Also one little favour will I ask, not for myself, but for another.”

This speech pleased the Khan greatly, for it was

plain this man was no boaster—Asaf Khan no boaster ! Also he was a man of sense, for he had come to the one place in Afghanistan where a perfect warrior could be trained, to the one man who could give that training. And he now regretted the harshness of his sentence, though he would not unsay the order ; but if the man won, he would go free. If he lost, it was the will of Allah. As for the favour ; Asaf Khan asked it not for himself, but for another, so it would be some trifle. He gave his consent to the trial ; and while they unbound the man, Asaf Khan removed all his clothing except his loin cloth. And then was seen such a match as never anyone present had seen before.

Though not as broad as the man, Asaf Khan was taller, with a longer reach, and his frame through constant training was as supple as it was strong. For ten minutes the two circled round each other, seeking an opening. At last the man darted in and would have seized Asaf Khan round the waist ; but with a movement quick as the flash of a trout in a mountain stream, Asaf Khan eluded his grasp and seized him by the neck. He thought he had the man at his mercy ; but that bull-neck was as strong as the necks of three men. Grasping Asaf Khan's forearm with both hands, the man wrenched his neck free and sprang back. And so the fight went on. Once Asaf Khan was thrown, but he was up and away before the man could leap upon him ; and once the man was thrown, but he fell on his hands. Sometimes the victory inclined to one, sometimes to the other. But at last Asaf Khan prevailed. With a sudden twist and a mighty heave he cast the man

fairly on his back, and leaping on him, pressed his shoulders to the earth.

He rose panting and faced the Khan.

“ Have I done well ? Am I fit to be thy pupil ? ”

This speech pleased the Khan more than anything Asaf Khan had yet said. His mind was not at ease as he watched the struggle, for in strength this stranger was no ordinary man. If his spirit were high as his strength was great, it were better he left the valley. But in the moment of victory, when all men boast, this man boasted not. He thought of his victory only as proof of his fitness to be the Khan's pupil. The Khan grasped him by the hand.

“ It was indeed well done ! Thou shalt be my pupil, and the day shall come when people shall point at thee as the worthy pupil of a great master ! ”

Asaf Khan sighed. “ A little I know of the use of weapons,” he said meekly, “ but I have much to learn. But of the favour, O Khan ? ”

“ It is granted. Name it.”

“ That the man go free ; for had it not been for him, how could I have proved myself worthy.”

The Khan frowned at the first part of the sentence, but at the second half he smiled. This was indeed an humble spirit ; and he ordered the man to be taken to the gate of the fort and set free.

Then did the Khan lead Asaf Khan within and ordered food to be set before them, and they ate. Many questions he asked, and all Asaf Khan answered meekly ; but when the Khan would have him dwell within the fort, Asaf Khan said it might not be. On the grave of the holy Pir (saint) of his village had he

sworn that he would dwell in the house of no man till he had learned to be a warrior, but would be a wanderer, sleeping by the roadside or in mussafir khanas. This Asaf Khan said, knowing he had nothing to learn from the Khan, save perhaps love of ease, and it was in his mind that in secret the Khan loved the juice of the grape. Now it is, that men who love wine always love company when in their cups, and some day the Khan would surely ask Asaf Khan to drink with him. To refuse would anger the Khan, to drink would condemn his soul to eternal fire ; for Asaf Khan was a good Mussulman. Also in the house of the Khan he would see little of the people, and of them he wished to see much. But he promised to come daily to see the Khan and to learn from him the way to be a warrior ; and after they had talked some two hours, he left for the village.

He thought to see the man he had saved waiting for him somewhere without the gate, but to his surprise the man was not there. Some folk he met, and many came out to greet him as he neared the village ; but the man came not, and at this Asaf Khan wondered. In spite of his lapse from the straight path, a lapse Asaf Khan found it easy to pardon, the man looked a true man ; and yet he came not to thank the man who had saved him from such a cruel fate. But the people thanked him. It was the first time the Khan had decreed so severe a punishment, and had not his hand been stayed, how much further might he not have gone ! He was their Khan ; but they were freemen, and they were angered in their hearts at the power he was taking to himself. Yet would they not speak openly, for as yet

these thoughts were but in their hearts, and also they had none to lead them.

Thanking them for their thanks, Asaf Khan passed on and came to the mussafir khana. The door of his room was open, for when going to the house of the Khan he had left it so, that men might see he was of a trusting heart and had nothing to hide. Within, sat a man who cleaned and polished the gear of Asaf Khan's horse. The light was dim within the room, and the man's face was bent over his work.

"Who art thou?" asked Asaf Khan in surprise.

The man raised his head. "Men know me as Ilderim," he replied, "but now my name is Ghulam, for I am the ghulam (slave) of Asaf Khan." And it was the man whom Asaf Khan had saved.

Then did Asaf Khan's heart warm to the man, for he was a true man.

"No slave shalt thou be," he said, grasping the other by the hand and embracing him. "But brother shalt thou be. Thou hast strength, and I shall teach thee to be a warrior even as I am; so that in the days to come thy name shall be great even as the name of Asaf Khan is great!" And then he stopped, for already he had said too much. One who sought humbly to be the Khan's pupil to talk thus! But the man looked up with twinkling eyes.

"When I fled with the woman," he said, "I fled to the country of the Orakzai. There I heard of one Asaf Khan, and also saw him. Methinks he was thy brother. He could not have been thee, for this Asaf Khan was the greatest warrior in the land, and also a man of guile, as the daughter of the Khan had good cause to

know. Thou art simple in thy speech, and hast come hither to learn the art of war from that fat pig ! ” The man’s eyes blazed, and he rose suddenly to his feet. “ Cursed be he and all his House ! ” he burst out fiercely. “ Know, O Asaf Khan, that had he worked his will upon me, never would I have eaten till I had had his blood ! Help me, O Asaf Khan. There is something hidden in thy heart, for it is not thy wont to bear thyself thus humbly to any man. Thou seekest to deceive the Khan, and it is in my mind thou would’st work evil unto him. Help me to revenge myself upon this man, and I shall indeed be thy slave for ever ! ”

Asaf Khan knew he had one who would help him in whatsoever he undertook against the Khan ; but still he did not open his whole heart, only telling the man as much as he thought good. He called the man Ilderim, but to this name the man would not answer, saying that his name was now Ghulam, and no other name would he have, and Asaf Khan was fain to humour him.

For three months Asaf Khan abode in the valley and was the pupil of the Khan. Each day would he go to the Khan’s house, and there would he and the Khan talk of the days when the Khan was young. Sometimes the Khan would teach Asaf Khan the proper use of the sword—and at these times Asaf Khan laughed in his heart, for the Khan’s hand had lost its cunning, and he wielded the sword as a child might. Sometimes the Khan taught him to shoot at a mark, and then scarce could Asaf Khan hide his mirth. Once they fought with wooden knives ; but this was such foolishness that never again would Asaf Khan do the

like, for the knife was his favourite weapon. First he would learn the use of the sword and rifle, he said, and then he would learn to use the knife. But mostly the Khan talked of the days when he was young, and of the great deeds he had done.

Never in the evening went Asaf Khan ; for it is at even that men love to look upon the wine cup ; and he knew that the Khan was indeed a lover of wine.

And then came news that a raiding party would come to the further end of the valley ; for there be many spies in that land, and the Afghan will sell aught but the honour of his women for gold. The Khan had drunk heavily overnight, so that when they came to him with the news, his brain was dull and his speech confused. Why did they trouble him ? he asked in anger. Could they not deal with such a small matter themselves ? Surely he had led them often enough for them to have learned how such things should be done !

But the matter was not a small one, and the people looked uneasily at one another. The Khan who headed this raiding party was a great warrior, and the party he led a large one ; but while they hesitated, Asaf Khan came. Knowing well what the answer of the Khan would be, Asaf Khan came not with the people ; but when he judged the answer given, he came.

Then was the Khan glad ; for it was as if ten men with hammers beat upon his head, and he would fain leave this noisy crowd and go into his chamber and rest. Three months had he taught Asaf Khan ; and in a small matter such as this was, Asaf Khan could lead the people. He told the people so, and Asaf Khan thanked him humbly for the honour he had done him

in choosing him to lead the people of so famous a warrior.

“ But for three months have I learned from thee,” he said, “and ever shall I think what thou would’st do in like case. Thus shall we drive this enemy from our gates, and fresh honour shall be added to thy name.”

When they left the gate, Asaf Khan halted the men and told them a strange thing. There was no raiding party coming, he said ; it was he had caused the news to be sent. But when they asked him, he would not say why he had done this thing, nor how ; only he bade them return to their homes, for there would be no raid.

Now, this was untrue, for Asaf Khan had not caused this news to be sent ; but even in the village might be spies, and he would not have them know what he would do. His words would puzzle them, and they would wonder if they were mistaken, or if Asaf Khan were as foolish as the Khan. They might even think him a secret friend of the Khan who led the raid, for such things have been.

But when the men returned to their homes, Asaf Khan called the man Ghulam, who was before known as Ilderim, to him ; and bade the man go round the village and warn all true men to meet him that night at a spot without the village. To none but those he knew to be true must he give this message ; and they must not leave the village together, but in twos and threes as if they went to take the air.

They came wondering ; and after Asaf Khan had told them why he spoke as he did at the gate of the

fort, he told them what he had a mind to do. Why wait till the enemy came? he urged. The raiding party would reach the entrance to the valley on the following evening, and would attack at dawn. Why wait for them to attack? Let every true man leave the village on the following evening, and going to the outlying villages, collect the fighting men. Let them collect in some spot, and make their way in haste to the entrance to the valley. They would arrive by midnight; and in the small hours of the morning, when the enemy was sunk in sleep, they could attack their foe and destroy them.

The men approved the plan, wondering whence Asaf Khan had got it; for they knew he could not have learned such guile from the Khan; and they returned to their homes.

It happened as Asaf Khan had foretold. The enemy, roused from their slumbers by the war cries of the men of the valley, made a feeble defence and were defeated with great slaughter. Great honour was gained by the men of the valley that day; but of all who fought there, none fought as Asaf Khan fought. None could stand before him. Whirling his sword around his head, he plunged into the thickest of the strife, and then drawing his great knife, he carved a way out. Many a foeman he laid low; but ever he sought another, for it was the Khan he sought; and at last they met. Strong as a lion was the Khan, and with a lion's courage; but naught availed him against Asaf Khan. The others, seeing who fought, drew apart and watched the conflict.

It was short. The Khan was a great warrior, but

Asaf Khan was a greater ; and he was better with the knife. The flash of the swords ; the clang of steel on the round leather shields with brass bosses each man bore ; and then, dropping his sword, Asaf Khan sprang in with his knife. In vain the Khan strove to interpose his shield. His day was come ; and with a groan he sank to earth, Asaf Khan's knife buried to the hilt in his breast.

It was the end. As one man the enemy turned, and the men of the valley slew them as they fled. Never was so great a victory, and the glory was—Asaf Khan's.

Men wondered. Even as they gathered round him with words of praise they wondered. This was no pupil of the Khan, this was a warrior greater than the Khan—greater than the Khan had ever been, even in the days of his youth. And yet this man came to learn from the Khan ! There was some mystery in this. Whence came this Asaf Khan ? He said he came from the Border ; but could the Border produce such men ! Why was he not their Khan, rather than the one who drank wine in secret, leaving others to lead his men in the day of battle !

Thus they murmured among themselves, though to Asaf Khan they said nothing of what was in their thoughts. But he knew the hearts of men, and guessed the meaning of their murmurs. But the time was not yet, and this matter must be kept from the ears of the Khan.

“ Have I done well this day ? ” he asked.

And they answered with a great shout. “ Thou hast done well ! A great warrior art thou, O Asaf Khan !

never have we seen man fight as thou didst fight this day ! ”

“ Then grant me this,” said Asaf Khan. “ Let no word of my fighting this day pass your lips till I give the word.”

Again the people murmured, this time against Asaf Khan ; but he would have his will, and they promised.

And so it was from the mouth of Asaf Khan alone that the Khan heard of the fight, of the cowardly enemy that ran at the first alarm, and of the faint-hearted Khan who hid himself and was slain by some unknown man.

“ In not going thou were right, as thou always art,” said Asaf Khan. “ For it is not fitting that a great warrior should go forth against an unworthy enemy.”

But in the village, Asaf Khan spoke otherwise to the man Ghulam ; and the man spoke to other men, though he did not say it was the words of Asaf Khan he spoke. And ever the murmurs grew louder, for men began to say that wine had sapped the Khan’s courage ; and that he did not go forth to battle because he feared. The Khan had no son ; let him adopt Asaf Khan and make the country over to him. Then could he sit and drink wine if he chose, for the valley would be safe. Also they remembered the Khan’s harshness, and the way he would have dealt with the man Ghulam.

Each day men grew more impatient ; and one night they came to the room in which Asaf Khan dwelt, and spoke their thoughts. At first he drove them from him with reproaches ; but the next night they returned, and he listened. It was for the good of the valley, they pleaded. The Khan was a wine-bibber. He was fat

and indolent ; unable, afraid it may be, to lead his people to battle. He would never consent to give up his kingdom, it must be taken from him by force. Little they knew it was Asaf Khan's own words they spoke, put into their mouths by the man Ghulam.

Asaf Khan listened, but he would not that night give them their answer. He must think this over, in a week he would tell them what he would do. For he knew they could not now go back ; they must go on, and the longer he kept them waiting, the hotter would they be to have him as their Khan. And in the morning, that men might think he would weigh the matter in his mind alone and undisturbed, he went behind the fort where no man came, for there was naught there but rocks and brambles.

Asaf Khan smiled as he thought how these men were doing his will, and he was about to seat himself in the shadow of the wall, when he heard voices on the other side, the voices of women. Now in those days, the voice of a woman was of all sounds the most displeasing in Asaf Khan's ears, and he would have left the spot ; but as he rose, he saw behind him a hole in the wall screened with bushes, and glancing idly through it, Asaf Khan saw the maiden.

Many maidens had Asaf Khan seen, but never had he seen maiden like this. Fair as a peri was she, fair as a houri of Paradise, and Asaf Khan's glance lingered. Fair and golden was she, her tresses in the morning sunshine blazing like a living glory about her head. A bare seventeen summers had her blue eyes looked upon, eyes that held the mystery of womanhood in their depths and yet were the eyes of a child. Sitting

on a rough bench, she talked sportively with her maidens, her merry laugh ringing out anon like the clashing of small silver bells.

She was, she must be, the daughter of the Khan ; and it came into Asaf Khan's mind that when he had slain the Khan, the girl would be his. To wed or not to wed as seemed best to him, but the girl would be his. His pulse beat faster at the thought, for the maiden was indeed beautiful.

Presently the maiden withdrew into the house, and Asaf Khan returned to the village ; but often that day she was in his thoughts, and the next day again came Asaf Khan to the hole in the wall of the garden.

The maiden was there, clad in a soft clinging garment that showed the faultless beauty of her figure ; and Asaf Khan's eyes glowed with the desire to possess her for his own. That night he would tell the men that he was ready, and to-morrow they would storm the fort. The Khan knew naught of what was toward, his men would fight half-heartedly, the fort would be taken, the Khan slain, and the maiden would be his ! Asaf Khan's eyes blazed, and his pulse beat in his throat at the thought.

But then the maiden turned her head and looked towards Asaf Khan. She looked at a bird ; nor saw Asaf Khan, for the hole was hid by the leaves of a bush that grew within, and Asaf Khan saw her eyes. Almost they seemed to meet his, and he caught his breath sharply at the sight. Never had he seen a face like this, and never had he seen such eyes ! This was no houri, this was one of Allah's farishtas (angels). Pure, with the purity of Heaven was her gaze, and with

the innocence of a child. And he would soil this purity ! He would drag through the mire of infamy the soul that looked through those eyes ! Starting from the hole, he left the place with rapid footsteps.

No rest had Asaf Khan that day. Always he thought of the maiden, and always he thought of her eyes ; and when the men came that night, though he told them to wait a few days more, he cursed himself for a fool. It must have been a trick of the light, he told himself as he tossed restlessly on his bed. Many maidens had he seen, and many maidens had cause to rue the day he saw them, but in the eyes of none had he seen this look. It was not a look of earth, but of Heaven. It must have been a trick of the light.

With the dawn he was astir ; and walking forth, to his amaze and anger he presently found himself behind the wall. What witchcraft was this ? He had not meant to come hither, and lo ! here he was. Turning from the spot he strode angrily away ; but presently he sank into thought, and lo ! he was again at the garden wall ! A third time he left, his heart full of wrath, and a third time he found himself at the wall. With a curse he threw himself down. The maiden would come presently, and he would see if her eyes in truth held the look he thought he had seen.

She came ; but though Asaf Khan gazed as if with his eyes he would have devoured that fair form, for long her face did not turn in his direction. At last the bird sang again, for it was building its nest in a tree that grew near the wall ; and hearing its song, the maiden looked.

Asaf Khan shaded his eyes with his hands, for he

was dazzled by the glory of that look. It was no trick of the light. The look was there, as he had seen it before, and Asaf Khan's heart turned to water within his breast. He desired this maiden. Above all things in heaven or earth he desired this maiden, but she was not for him. To possess her he must first slay her father and bring sorrow into her life. How could he quench the light of innocent mirth in those eyes? How could he, stained with her father's blood, face the horror he would see in those angel eyes?

Blind, he rushed from the spot, and for many hours raged the countryside, cursing himself, fate, the earth, the heavens, all things, for this that had come to him. And the more he cursed, the more he desired the maiden, and the more he knew he could not slay her father to win her. His blood was a consuming flame, and like a madman he strode onward with haggard face. He would leave this cursed country, and in the life of a warrior he would forget this maiden; but even as he said he would do it, he knew he could not. At last to him came the man Ghulam, and with brotherly sympathy and shrewd questions drew from Asaf Khan the cause of his disorder.

Hardly could the man believe, for of Asaf Khan and his way with maidens he had heard much when he dwelt in the land of the Orakzais; but presently he knew, and he smiled covertly. Asaf Khan loved. His foolishness was the foolishness of a love-sick boy, and as a love-sick boy must he be dealt with. He must not tell Asaf Khan he loved; nor must he belittle the maiden. Nay, he must praise her and urge Asaf

Khan to win her, for—and here his brow grew dark—only thus could he have revenge upon the Khan. And slay the Khan he must, or he would not wish to live another day.

Softly he spoke and long, and as he talked a measure of peace came to Asaf Khan. The maiden was beautiful, said the man, and she was good ; but all maidens were thus till they became otherwise, and Asaf Khan had seen only the other sort. There was no need to slay the Khan. Once his fort was taken, he could do naught, for he was not the man to head a rising. As for the maiden ; maids were not meant by Heaven to be maids always ; and in the arms of a warrior such as Asaf Khan was known to be, she would not long lament her maiden state. Asaf Khan listened, and when the men came that night, he said he was ready. Tomorrow he would take the fort, but—and this he made them swear—the Khan must not be harmed.

Even Ghulam he made to swear ; and though the man resisted long, for his heart thirsted to wipe out in blood the shame the Khan had put upon him, in the end Asaf Khan prevailed. For the love he bore Asaf Khan, the man consented to spare the Khan's life ; but he would pull the Khan's beard. By the beard would he pull the Khan round the courtyard in the sight of all men, and this revenge he would not forego.

Asaf Khan would have come suddenly upon the fort, but the others would not have it so. They were freeing the valley from the yoke of a tyrant, and all must be done in due form. Thus it was with banners flying, with shrill pipes screaming, and the noise of much shouting they came ; and the Khan's men,

seeing their coming and guessing their reason, fled from the fort by a back way.

Only the Khan remained. Some of his old spirit returned to him, and standing at the door of the house, he barred the way ; but when the crowd rushed into the courtyard, Asaf Khan at their head, he slammed and bolted the door ; and fleeing to his daughter's chamber, hid himself beneath her bed.

Not long did the door withstand the shower of blows that beat upon it. With a crash it burst from its hinges, and Asaf Khan strode into the house. The shouting had stirred his blood, the smashing of the door made it stir more quickly, and now the thought of the maiden made it flame like living fire. Ghulam had spoken well. It was the destiny of all maidens. In the arms of a warrior such as Asaf Khan, she would be content.

Leaving the others to plunder the living rooms, Asaf Khan passed to the back, where he knew the women's apartments would be ; and throwing aside a curtain, entered the chamber he sought. Her maidens cowered in corners, uttering cries of fear at sight of him ; but the maiden stood erect in the centre of the room, and faced him as he entered.

The blood now beat in his head, and his breathing was heavy. Striding to where the maiden stood, with rude hand he tore the veil from her head, tearing also the band that held her hair so that it fell and hung a golden cloak around her, rippling even to her knees. As that beauteous form was disclosed, Asaf Khan sprang forward with a cry of mad exultation ; but ere he touched her he stopped, bereft of speech,

struck motionless by the proud scorn of those eyes.

Summer lightnings flashed within their depths as they glowed with the anger of the angry dove that defends its young. Quickly she moved so that she stood between Asaf Khan and the bed, and then she spoke.

"Thou art Asaf Khan," she said, "for I have seen thee from the lattice. Thou art the man who would be a warrior. True warrior's work is this, to burst into a maiden's room and afright her and her damsels ! True warrior's work it is to deceive an old man, and then seek to slay him ! What would'st thou here ? "

Hardly could Asaf Khan speak, and he could not meet her eyes.

"I seek not thy father's life," he muttered. "Tell me where he is hid that I may save him from the man Ghulam, who would put great shame upon him." For now Asaf Khan knew he could not let the man drag the Khan round the courtyard by the beard ; for the maiden would see. But the maid believed him not.

"I know not where my father hides," she said. "Begone ! And take shame to thyself for having come hither ! "

But she moved closer to the bed as she spoke, and Asaf Khan knew where the Khan lay hid. He moved a pace towards the bed, but she confronted him ; and now those gentle eyes flamed as flames the sword of the angel that guards the gates of Paradise. With upraised hand she stood, pointing to the door, and Asaf Khan paused. A moment they stood thus,

facing each other ; and then with downcast eyes and drooping head Asaf Khan turned and left the room.

How had this thing come to pass ? he wondered moodily as he returned to the front of the house. He had entered the room eager to possess the maiden, resolved to possess her, and lo ! he had left the room like a beaten cur ! She was a weak maiden, but she had given him, Asaf Khan, glance for glance, and had beaten him. Why had he not clasped her to him and hidden her eyes on his breast ? Why had he not plucked the Khan from his hiding place and bartered her father's life for her surrender ?

And so Asaf Khan became Khan of the valley. The men left for their homes, save a few whom Asaf Khan engaged in place of those who had fled ; and the man Ghulam, who for the love he bore Asaf Khan had consented to forego even his revenge upon the Khan's beard, remained also.

All that day the Khan remained hid in his daughter's chamber, though Asaf Khan sent word that no harm would come to him ; but at even the thirst for wine overcame him, and he stole from the room. Not far had he ventured when he came upon Asaf Khan. With a cry of fear he would have fled, but Asaf Khan laughed and held him by the shoulder.

" It is peace," he said. " Naught shall be done to thee. In this house thou shalt dwell and shalt order all things. Only in the affairs of the valley canst thou no longer order, for this is the will of the people."

Then did the Khan breathe freely. In truth he was glad to be relieved of this burden ; for now he

HOW ASAF KHAN LEARNED TO LOVE III

could drink by night and take his ease by day, with naught to trouble him.

“ It is good,” he said. “ Thou art my pupil and will remember my teachings ; thus will all be well with the valley.”

Next day did Asaf Khan steal round to the back of the wall, for he would see the maiden again ; but she came not forth, and Asaf Khan returned gloomily to the house. The next day he went, and the next, but still the maiden came not ; and his soul thirsted for her even as the man lost in the desert thirsts for the sight of the water that will give him life. For in truth Asaf Khan now felt as one of the dead, nor wished to live. What ailed him he knew not ; and why he could not go as master and demand the maiden that also he knew not ; but he must see her, and on the fourth day he went to her chamber.

The Khan was there, and hearing Asaf Khan's footsteps, he looked through the curtain.

“ Come within and we will talk,” he said. “ Here is but the child, my daughter, and there is no need for her to hide from the friend of her father.” For now that the cares of the valley no longer troubled him the Khan drank somewhat during the day, and his wits were not clear.

Asaf Khan entered ; and as he did so, the maiden removed her veil.

“ This man has already seen my face,” she said with gentle disdain. “ What need to hide it now ? ”

Each day came Asaf Khan to the maiden's chamber to talk with the Khan, and ever as he entered she removed her veil. She never noticed him again, but

busied herself with her maidens, and sometimes she spoke to them. Her voice was soft and low, like the cooing of the wood pigeon ; and always as she spoke Asaf Khan would forget what he was saying as he listened to the music of that gentle voice. Sometimes he went to the garden wall, but she came not there, and Asaf Khan cast himself down on the soft earth.

Would she never speak to him ? If she but would ! If she would but speak to him in the gentle tones she used to her maidens ! What bliss would it be were her eyes to rest on him but once while they held the look he remembered so well in the days that were gone. But he never saw that look in them now. Would he ever see it again !

And then one day one of the damsels asked the maiden why she no longer walked in the garden, begging her to walk there next day, and the maiden consented.

Asaf Khan was there. A full hour before she came he was behind the garden wall awaiting her coming. How the minutes dragged ! Would she never come ! At last she came. But could this be the maiden who had danced joyfully down the path a few short days before ! This maiden who walked sadly and listlessly, as if the light had gone from her life and all joy from her heart ! Sinking upon the bench, the maiden gazed mournfully before her, and then she wept. Softly she wept, like a little child, and the sight sent Asaf Khan mad.

It was he who had done this thing ! Before he crossed her path, she was a creature of joy and of sun-

shine—now she wept ! Casting himself on the ground he buried his face in the earth, tearing great tufts of grass by the roots in his agony of mind. He was not fit to live ! He would leave her ! Nay, he knew he could not do that. He would slay himself. Perchance when she heard that he had died that she might be happy, she would smile again, and the sunshine return to her heart.

He must do this thing soon, or the thought of never seeing her more might overcome his resolve. But as he rose, the maidens were speaking ; and the wind being from them to him, he heard their words, which had never been before. The maiden was speaking, and Asaf Khan listened, his heart in his ears

“ Yet what can I do ? ” she was saying mournfully. “ From the first day I saw him from the lattice I loved him, and ever as I saw him my love grew more ; but how can I love him now ? He has wrested my father’s land, he has shamed me by looking on my face, how can I love him now ? And yet—” she sighed softly, and her voice when next she spoke was the most beautiful sound Asaf Khan had ever heard. “ And yet he is a proper man. No harm has he done my father. He has even saved him for the men of the valley would have slain the Khan. He tore the veil from my head, but methinks he would not do so now.” Her lips curled in a smile that set Asaf Khan’s heart beating madly and the blood dancing through his veins. “ He desires me to wife, that I know ; but he desires me as he would desire any woman who found favour in his eyes. It is love

I want, for—" and she sighed again, "I love him still."

Then went Asaf Khan mad a second time ; but this time his madness was of another sort. Rushing from the spot so that the maidens should not hear him and be alarmed, he gave full vent to the joy that was in his heart. She loves me ! He bounded in the air, shouting the glorious news to the winds. She loves me ! She loves me ! Till surely if any had passed that way they would have deemed him mad. But presently his mood changed. It could not be. His ears had deceived him. He would go back and listen.

But the maiden was no longer in the garden, and Asaf Khan went into the house. It was now the hour at which he usually talked with the Khan, and he went to the maiden's chamber.

The Khan bade him enter, but Asaf Khan would not.

"No more shall I enter this chamber," he said, "till the maiden herself bids me enter."

There was a moment's silence within the room, and then the maiden's voice was heard, gently bidding him enter.

Asaf Khan raised the curtain, but as the maiden removed her veil, he dropped the curtain again.

"It is my punishment," he said sadly ; "but surely so gentle a form cannot hide so hard a heart. Resume thy veil, maiden, I pray thee ; for then I shall know my fault is forgiven."

"Enter then," and now her voice was as when she talked with her maidens, and Asaf Khan knew he was forgiven. Could he hope for more !

Her damsels were about their household duties, and the maiden was alone ; for the Khan had drunk more wine than usual that day, and after bidding Asaf Khan enter had forgotten him, and going into another chamber had thrown himself down on a bed in a drunken sleep. Seeing the maiden alone Asaf Khan would have withdrawn, but she bade him be seated and he obeyed.

Almost was Asaf Khan sorry the maiden had veiled herself ; for now naught could he see, even her eyes were hidden. But he was forgiven, and that was much ! And now a great resolve came into Asaf Khan's heart ; a strange resolve. Before, he could not leave the maiden, but now he could. Before, he could have died to give her happiness, but now he could live to do so.

" I leave the valley to-morrow," he said abruptly.

The maiden started, and it seemed that she caught at her heart ; but she said nothing, and Asaf Khan spoke again.

" I have done wrong. I can undo the wrong I have done, and undo it I will. Thy father shall again be Khan, and the light shall return to thine eyes, the joy to thy heart. For me ? What matters ? I go even as I came, and in a few days will my name be forgotten."

There was a moment of silence, and then the maiden sighed.

" Not by me," she whispered ; and at the words the blood rushed to Asaf Khan's head so that for a space he could not see, hear, nor speak ; and then with a great cry he cast himself at the maiden's feet.

" Thou art an angel !" he cried. " I am not

worthy of thy lightest thought ! I would have done thee wrong ! When we took the fort, it was in my mind to possess thee, with thy will or against it. This I would have done, and this thou canst never forgive. My punishment is great, for now I love thee. For many days have I loved thee ; but never have I loved like this, and I knew not that I loved. Now I know. Bitter it is to know what might have been ! But the past is past, and to-morrow I go. Thou wilt wed one more worthy, but think sometimes with kindness of the unhappy Asaf Khan," and he sobbed once, the harsh dry sob of a strong man's agony.

No answer made the maiden at first ; but she stooped low over him, and tears soft as the gentle summer rain fell from her eyes.

" Go not," she whispered, " I bid thee stay." But as Asaf Khan, half disbelieving his ears started to his feet, she withdrew a pace. Her veil was thrown back, and at the glory in her eyes, Asaf Khan's breath came in a great gasp.

" Thou bidst me stay ! " he cried. " I have told thee I love thee and thou bidst me stay ! Why ! "

" Because," the colour mounted to her face and the radiance of her eyes was dazzling, " because I love thee."

In a moment she was clasped in his arms ; and while he pressed burning kisses upon her lips, his heart sang a paeon of joy. She loved him ! In spite of all she loved him ! She would be his wife ; the mother of his son ! And then the Khan fired.

Waking from his slumber and hearing voices, he

peeped into the room. His daughter in the arms of Asaf Khan ! All his Afghan blood boiled at the dishonour that had been put upon a woman of his House ; and snatching a revolver from his belt, in his drunken frenzy he fired.

One little sigh was all she gave. " Kiss me once more," she murmured, and then she died.

CHAPTER VI

HOW ASAF KHAN BECAME A RIFLE THIEF

FOR six years no man who knew him saw Asaf Khan. Even the man Ghulam, though he sought far and wide, could not find the man who was more than brother to him. Some said he was mad, and lived with the wild beasts of the forest; while others said he was the hermit who lived among the rocks of the great hills in the Bunerwal country. But no man knew, till one day he walked into his father's house in Kai.

He came as a stranger; for none recognised Asaf Khan in this haggard man with deeply lined face; and it was not till he spoke that even his father knew him.

Then was Kadir Shah sore at heart for this that had come to his son, and fain would he have questioned him, but with burning eyes Asaf Khan bade him cease. To none would he speak of those years, and one who jeered, saying he had been to Hindustan and had been in the jail of the English, him he slew. Now this was a man of the House of Wazir Ali, and

thus began the blood feud between the House of Wazir Ali and the House of Kadir Shah.

No wife took Asaf Khan for many days, and his eyes glowed angrily when his father spoke to him of marriage ; but one day he led the young men of the village on a raid against a passing caravan, and from the raid he returned with a woman. She was a daughter of the north, and fair, with the golden hair and blue eyes often seen in the women of those parts ; and her Asaf Khan took to wife.

Gentle she was, and sometimes in her eyes Asaf Khan saw the look he had seen in the eyes of one who died ; but he loved her not, though he was kind to her. Then she bore him a son, a great healthy boy, and Asaf Khan could have loved her for the gift she had bestowed ; but when the child was a year old she died.

A child must have the care of women, and Asaf Khan took into his house two more wives ; but they bore him no children, and his whole soul was wrapped up in his son.

Now a strange thing came to pass ; for as the boy grew older he grew not like his father, nor yet like his mother, but ever he grew like Asaf Khan's lost love. His eyes were blue, his hair gold, so that as time passed, the whole heart of Asaf Khan became bound up in this his son.

Then came the day when Asaf Khan left his home for Jamrud, and as the boy would not be safe in Kai, Asaf Khan took his son to Jamrud and put him in the care of a friend. This friend could both read and write, also knowing somewhat of the strange

tongue of the English ; and he advised Asaf Khan to put his son in the Mission school, where he would learn, and would not waste his time ; and though Asaf Khan scorned all learning for himself, he thought it good that his son should learn.

Next day he took the boy to the school, and asked to see the Mission padre, and when he was taken to the missionary, he held forward his son.

“ Of the English I know little,” he said, “ and of their priests I know less ; but men say thou art good and to be trusted, and in thy hands therefore would I leave my son to be taught the strange knowledge the English possess. But with his faith thou hast naught to do. Seek but in one small matter to turn him from the faith of his fathers, and I will surely slay thee and thy whole house.”

The missionary smilingly assured him that they never interfered with the boys' religions, and Asaf Khan left his son, afterwards seeking employment which he found at Jamrud, where he learned to fear not the fire carriages of the English, and even dared to ride in them. As for the boy, he was clever, and in the three years his father dwelt in Jamrud, he learned three times as much as most boys learn in three times three years. With his golden hair and blue eyes he was so like an English boy, that the missionary took much interest in him, and also the missionary's wife, seeing him the first day he went to the school, felt her heart drawn to the boy, for in many ways he resembled a son she had lost. So that instead of the boy being put into the boarding house with the rest of the boys, she took him to her

own house and, giving him a room, bade him live there. Once he went to Kai, when the blood feud between the House of Wazir Ali and the House of Kadir Shah was ended, and after helping his father in the defence of the house, he returned to Peshawar.

Then came the day when Asaf Khan was tried for attempting to kill the stationmaster and was acquitted. But the post of chaukidar at Jamrud was taken from him. He was a fierce man, and dangerous, and also word of how he had made peace between his father's House and the House of Wazir Ali came to Jamrud.

Though Asaf Khan had fair wealth in jewels, it behoved him to do something, lest instead of leaving his son more than his father left him he leave him less. He did not wish to return to the Border, and in Hindustan was naught he could do.

At last one, a trader, asked him to join in a venture to Hindustan, and though at first Asaf Khan spat at the word trader, he in the end agreed to join the man. He would find half the money, and would accompany the man, but in the trading he would take no part. And so began a new life for Asaf Khan, no longer warrior, but trader.

First they went to Rawalpindi; but in that city were many traders from the Border, so presently they took seat in the fire carriages, and passing Lahore, went to the great city of Delhi.

In Delhi they traded not, for the people of Delhi are of all people the most cunning in barter; but to the villages they went. Here the folk were simple, and the hearts of the women were easily beguiled

by the brave display the trader set before them.

Stones there were, of little worth, but precious in the eyes of the simple women. Work of gold thread from Peshawar. Muslins and silks from Delhi. Fine turbans, slippers and knives to tempt the young men ; and for all the trader asked no payment. Why talk of payment ? The things were theirs ; he had brought them so that they could make as brave a show as the proud people of Delhi. When they went to the great city none would know they were villagers, but would think they belonged to the house of some great Khan. As for payment, he would take that afterwards, say in two months' time ; and though he asked much for his wares, the thought of the envy of their neighbours tempted the women and the young men, so that they bought. Besides, two months is a long time ; much may happen in two months.

And thus went the trader to all the villages, returning to Delhi when his goods were sold, for more. But in all this Asaf Khan took no part. Silently would he stand by ; and though at times he would have liked to beat the folk for their foolishness, he said naught. After all it was trade, and the more the profit, the more would his share be.

At the end of two months the trader stopped selling and went round collecting what the people owed. Then was much sadness and trouble in the villages ; for the women had to tell their husbands of the money they owed the Pathans, and their husbands beat them sorely. Some husbands paid the money with much

cursing, but some refused. These the trader threatened with his stick, and most paid. Those who refused to pay, he beat, threatening to waylay their women as they brought water from the well, and the threat was sufficient. Some of the young men had no money, and these the trader beat every day till their friends paid the debt.

At one village, word of their coming went before them, and the villagers armed themselves with sticks. But here Asaf Khan took part, and the people of that village paid up in quicker time than the people of any other village. The villagers could have told the police, but only fools tell the police. The Pathans took their money, it is true, but they gave something in return; the police would take far more money than the Pathans took, and would give nothing.

At the end, Asaf Khan found his share of the money doubled; but he did not like the life, and parted company with the trader. There were many Pathans in Delhi, and one Asaf Khan had come to know. He was no trader, he was a warrior; but what he did in Delhi he would not say; but would laughingly tell Asaf Khan to go on with his trading. When Asaf Khan was tired of the life of a trader he might speak, but not before.

It was to this man Asaf Khan went when he parted from the trader, and the man welcomed him.

“It is good,” he said. “Thou art no trader, but a warrior, and should take part only in such ventures as befit a warrior. Join me, for the man with whom I work has just died and I need another to help me. It is work befitting a man and a warrior, for”—

and he whispered the words, "our business is the taking of guns."

Now, though Asaf Khan had often heard of the men who bring guns from Hindustan and sell them on the Border for great sums, he had never met one. Often he wondered how they stole the guns, and having done so, how they conveyed them secretly to the Border; but though he asked men, none could tell him. In Hindustan guns were stolen, and a reward was offered. A few months afterwards guns were sold on the Border, and none could say how they got there. Now he would know. This was fit work for a warrior, the lifting of guns, and he would join the man.

First they went to Meerut; but though there were soldiers in Meerut, the soldiers had been many years in Hindustan, and had also just come from Peshawar. No rifle thief would get a gun from them, so Asaf Khan and the man, who gave his name as Aladad Khan, went to Ambala.

Now the regiment in Ambala had come from England only the year before, and were careless in the matter of rifles; with luck the two might get a rifle from here, with great luck more than one; but the luck which they had they never thought to have, for they got six! And in this wise they got them.

It happened that the guard-room of this regiment lay a little apart from the barracks, and behind it was a ground where the white soldiers hit a ball about with a curved stick of an afternoon. A path led by the guard-room, and as in a guard-room there

are always rifles, by this path Asaf Khan and Aladad Khan passed often.

Soon they noticed that when the soldiers played in the afternoon, some of the men on guard would go to the back to watch the game, and from that day they passed by that way every afternoon. For a month they passed, and then one day the sentry that walked up and down in front was not there.

The two men stood, hardly daring to believe their eyes, and then with a swift step Asaf Khan moved so that he could see the back of the guard-room. The sentry stood at the corner, resting on his rifle ! In an instant Asaf Khan had given the signal, and the next moment Aladad Khan was in the guard-room. Six rifles he seized, and slipping them under his clothes, walked out of the guard-room and down the path, Asaf Khan following.

It was a fearsome walk. Every minute Asaf Khan expected to hear the alarm given, and to see the white soldiers in pursuit ; but naught occurred. In a few minutes that seemed hours they reached the main road, and crossing it, were in the shelter of a growth of young trees. Both knew what to do—had they not talked it over a hundred times ?—and three of the six rifles being transferred to Asaf Khan, they started off at a steady trot for the hills. Only horses could overtake them now, and who knew which way they had taken ?

Till dark they ran, and before dawn they again rose and ran ; so that by evening they reached the hills and lost themselves among the ravines. None could find them now, and they rested while they

talked over the more difficult part of their plan, to get the rifles past Rawalpindi. Let us draw a veil over what happened at Ambala when the theft of the rifles was discovered.

Three weeks later, two Pathans walked up the Grand Trunk Road as it neared Sohawa. They looked like traders, for they carried on their backs the small leather satchels in which traders usually carry their goods ; but these were no traders, these were Asaf Khan and Aladad Khan, and the innocent looking satchels held the pieces of the six rifles, well wrapped in cloth. Aladad Khan would not have come this way, but the other road was long, and Asaf Khan was impatient to push on by the shorter route. This part of the country was safe, he argued. It was open, and the uniform of a policeman could be seen afar.

They met few people, some villagers going from one village to a close one, or a bullock cart of grain on its way to the nearest station ; but as they came to a place where the road passes between deep ravines, they met a wedding party. A gaily dressed crowd, they came down the road to the music of pipes ; and the two stood aside to let them pass. Alas ! they did not pass !

The first few men passed, but then at a signal the policemen, for such they really were, threw themselves on the two Pathans and overpowered them in an instant.

Great was the rejoicing among the policemen when the bundles were opened ; and the bridegroom, who doffing his veil and robes turned out to be the English

Inspector, congratulated his men on the capture they had made. For three weeks had this marriage procession passed down the road daily, seizing every Pathan they met, and often they had thought it time thrown away ; but now they were more than repaid for the trouble they had taken.

Asaf Khan ground his teeth with rage ; but when he thought of the fate that awaited him, he turned pale. He would be sent across the Black water (transported) for perhaps six or eight years; what would become of his son ? And yet what could he do, handcuffed, and with three men on either side of him. He struggled once, but the policemen beat him with their batons, and with a snarl he desisted.

And so the two were taken ingloriously to Sohawa, and put with a guard into the first train for Rawalpindi. Asaf Khan gazed despairingly out of the window. He would be put in prison ! Better dead than in prison, but he could not die. He could refuse to eat ; but he had heard that in prisons, if a man refuses to eat, the doctors come and force food down his throat with a pump ! Vile thought !

Now this was not a prison van, but an ordinary third class carriage from which the passengers had been removed to make room for the prisoners and their escort. It should have been locked, but the policemen were so elated at the capture they had made, that they were careless, and the doors were left unlocked. It would have made little difference, but the passengers who were before in the compartment had eaten sugar-cane, and had thrown the chewed pieces on the floor. Displeased with the mess, one

of the policemen opened the door and began to push out the stuff with his foot.

It was a desperate chance, but the only one. With a savage wrench Asaf Khan tore the chain of the handcuffs from the hands of the man who held it, and in another moment hurled himself from the moving train. One of the policemen leaped after him, but fell on his neck and broke it; so that the others hesitated to leap, but waved wildly from the windows to attract the attention of the engine driver or the guard. Neither looked, and as the cord which is in some carriages, the pulling of which will stop the train, was not in theirs, they went with the train to the next station, while their prisoner made off across country.

For by a miracle Asaf Khan escaped unhurt. Not only was he unhurt, but in the confusion his bundle fell out of the carriage. It contained the pieces of three rifles, rifles for which he had risked life and liberty.

Snatching up the bundle, Asaf Khan's first impulse was to make for the north and lose himself among the foothills, but on second thoughts he considered this unwise. On arrival at Missa the police would immediately set off in that direction, and he would be intercepted. Where then should he go? Should he leave the rifles to their fate and set off unhampered? That, he was not inclined to do. For these rifles he had risked much; but could he only get them to the Border, the money he would receive for them would make up to him for all he had suffered. Where then should he go? He would go to Khewra.

In Khewra there dwelt a banniah (grocer and moneylender) of whom the man Aladad Khan had spoken to Asaf Khan. A banniah who would for a consideration help a man get secretly to Peshawar articles which he could not get there openly. He would go to this banniah and ask his help.

Asaf Khan continued running towards the hills ; but as soon as the train passed round a curve and was out of sight, he retraced his steps, and crossing the railway line, made off across country in the direction of Khewra. He had neither compass nor map ; but he had a fair idea of the direction, for they had been talking about Khewra and the banniah shortly before they met the police so disastrously, and a Pathan needs no compass. He has the sun by day and the stars by night, and needs no other compass.

In four days did Asaf Khan reach Khewra, and going to the house of the banniah, made the sign which Aladad Khan had taught him. He was hungry and weary, for he had eaten little by the wayside—the first day, while he wore handcuffs, he ate nothing. Vainly had he beaten those vile handcuffs against the sharp points of rocks ; the locks would not burst. Yet remove them he must, or he could not go near the dwellings of men. Desperate, he crept near a village as night fell, and hiding his wrists amid the loose folds of his clothes, he went to the shop of one who worked in iron.

“ See ! ” and he placed a piece of gold before the man. “ For this, what wilt thou do ? ”

Gold ! The man eyed it greedily. He would do anything for gold, and he told Asaf Khan so.

“ Then remove these,” and Asaf Khan held out his bruised wrists.

The man knew now with whom he was dealing, and it was not till he had received another piece of gold that he would remove the handcuffs.

Asaf Khan stretched his arms, rejoicing in his freedom ; and then with bared teeth he sprang upon the man, grasping him tightly by the throat and bearing him to the earth.

“ Now shall I slay thee ! ” he said ; but the man made pitiful signs for mercy, and Asaf Khan lightened his grip. He did not wish to kill the man, for when his body was found there would be a search ; but he wished to terrify him.

Dragging the trembling wretch to his feet, Asaf Khan stood over him while he heated the handcuffs in the fire and beat them into a shapeless mass. This mass Asaf Khan cooled in water, and then placed in his waistcloth.

“ Now,” he said, “ if thou sayest aught to the police of this night’s work, I will show them the handcuffs thou didst remove and beat out of shape. Also I will come back, and this time I will hold thy neck till thou art dead ! ” and he advanced on the man.

The blacksmith dropped on his knees with hands raised in supplication ; and with a parting scowl Asaf Khan left.

He could now go near villages, though it might not be safe to enter them. He knew of the telegraph,

and word of him might have been sent to the thanas (police posts) round. Every Pathan was liable to be seized and made to give an account of himself; so Asaf Khan bought food from stray men he met in the fields, and went not into villages. These men would not betray him, for they dared not tell the police. They could not tell the police in which direction he had gone, for at sight of his eyes they grew afraid and dared not follow him; and in their disappointment the police would beat them. And so came Asaf Khan to the house of the banniah.

It was even as the man, Aladad Khan, had said. The banniah would help—for a consideration. And though the payment he asked was one fourth the value of the rifles on the Border, Asaf Khan had to agree. He made the payment in jewels, and made it at once, for those were the banniah's terms, and Aladad Khan said the man could be trusted; but he told the banniah that if there were any unfair dealing, he, Asaf Khan, would return, and would burn the banniah in his house.

The man smiled. He had lived in Peshawar, and had had dealings with Pathans, so that he feared them not as the other people of Hindustan feared them. Still, he knew they were not men to be played with, and also he made much profit by being their friend. He assured Asaf Khan that the rifles would be duly sent, and that Asaf Khan could take delivery of them at Peshawar; and then, drawing him aside to an inner chamber, he told him how the thing would be done.

Small chairs he had by him ; chairs of bamboo, painted, and enriched with grasswork ; chairs such as the wives of rich Khans love to have in their houses. Within the hollow of the bamboo work the pieces of the rifles would be hidden, one rifle in each chair ; and if the chair seemed a trifle heavy, the brass work would account for the extra weight. Two chairs he had ready, the third could be made in a few days. Till it was ready, Asaf Khan could dwell in a room in the corner of the courtyard, and either prepare food there, or eat it from the village shop. For at the hands of a Hindu Asaf Khan would not eat, and the banniah knew it.

All would have gone well ; but the banniah had a daughter, a widow. Being a Hindu, she could not re-marry ; but she was a woman, with a woman's feelings, and her husband had died when she was a child. Must she never marry ? Must she never know the love of a child ? A hard fate was hers, and often she rebelled in secret. Mussulman widows re-marry ! She had heard that English widows re-married. It was even said that in many Hindu castes widows now re-married. But in her caste they could not re-marry, and she was doomed to live her life alone.

It was of no particular man she thought when she thought of marriage ; it was of a child she thought, a little one who would nestle in her bosom, and whom she could love. It was the thought of having a home, of wearing jewellery again, and of holding up her head among other women. But when Asaf Khan came, it was otherwise ; and with the thought of the

child and the jewellery, began to mingle thoughts of a man.

He was a Mussulman, but his religion was kinder to women than hers was. It may be that he had a wife already, but his religion allowed more than one wife. She was fair to look upon ; and if the widow's veil hung loosely, who would notice she was only a widow ? The woman began to put herself in the way when Asaf Khan entered or left the courtyard.

Pretending she saw him not, she let her veil hang loose so that her face could be seen ; but Asaf Khan was wise in the wiles of women, and knew that she stood there of purpose. With a scowl he passed on, and the woman smiled. He had noticed her, and a beginning had been made. He had scowled ; but she was a Hindu, and from a Pathan of the Border she had expected nothing else.

The next time, drawing her veil tight round her face, she stood in his path.

" I am a widow," she said. " As a Hindu I may not re-marry. Is it true that if I become a Mussulman I can re-marry ? "

Asaf Khan glared at the woman. He suspected her reason for asking the question ; and pushing roughly past her, he went to his room. The woman flushed ; but still she smiled, though now the smile was angry.

The third time, she kept her face covered, but dropped her veil so that half her bosom was exposed ; standing so that unless he thrust her aside, Asaf Khan could not pass. With an exclamation of rage

Asaf Khan turned on his heel and left the courtyard.

This time the woman did not smile, and her hands clenched in anger. Was it the Hindu he despised, or was it the woman? For two days she watched him, for the chair took many days to make, and ever as she watched her passion grew. It was no longer of the jewellery she thought; even of the child she thought not; it was always of the man she thought.

Again she stood in his way, and this time she dropped her veil so that her face and her whole bosom were exposed, that bosom which had never known a man's touch; but with a frown Asaf Khan passed on. Long the woman thought that night. Was the man so cold that the sight of a woman's charms could not move him? That he would wed her, she no longer hoped; but that he should love her, if even but for an hour, she was determined. He was a man, and though he could withstand temptation that few men could resist, the last, the great temptation would find him weak.

All the house was sunk in slumber as she stole from her room. His door was slightly ajar, and she could hear his heavy breathing. Softly she crept to his bedside, and leaning over him, pressed her breast to his breast. And then came a dream to Asaf Khan.

Again he was in the valley, and again he clasped his lost love to his breast. He threw his arm around the clinging form, and awaking with the movement, found a live woman in his embrace, a hot palpitating

woman who pressed burning kisses on his lips.

With a deep curse he shook himself free and sprang from the bed. The woman followed him with outstretched arms, begging him to love her if for but one little hour; but seizing her by the shoulders he thrust her from the room, and slamming the door bolted it from within.

Then what a rage of fury burned in the woman's breast! Her love turned to hate, with upraised hands she cursed him by all her gods, and returning to her chamber, planned revenge. Well she knew his business with her father; she even knew what the satchel contained, for what can be hid from the eyes of a prying woman?

Her brother was a policeman, and this it was that induced the banniah to join with the rifle thieves. They are well known to the police, and through his son were soon well known to the banniah. The father of a policeman is safe from awkward questions, and when through his son he can make presents, he is doubly safe. But she would tell her brother a tale that would surely bend him to her will. Boy and girl they had grown up together, and even when she became a widow he had not withdrawn his comradeship; rather had he mourned with her, and pitied her unhappy lot.

To her father it was useless to speak. She was a widow, a burden and an incumbrance, a disgrace. Also there was much money in these ventures—and he was a banniah. To her brother would she tell how Asaf Khan had waylaid her and spoken words

of shameful love. Of how, when she repulsed him with scorn, he had said that a pig of a Hindu woman should feel honoured by the love of a Mussulman. That would rouse her brother, even if the first part did not. She smiled, and this time her smile was evil.

The English police officer sat in his daftar (office). The flies bothered him much, and the cawing of a rook outside bothered him still more. Three times had he thrown things at the crow, a paper-weight, a ruler, and an inkstand ; but still the crow was there. To him entered a chuprassi, with word of a policeman who came with important tidings for his Honour.

The officer nodded, and the policeman entered ; to be greeted by a scowl, for the crow was now perched on the window-sill, and there was naught save files to throw at him. But the scowl disappeared when the policeman began to speak. The crow was forgotten ; and ordering the policeman to come closer, the officer conversed with him in undertones.

* * * * *

The third chair was finished. The rifles would now be hidden within them, the chairs booked to Peshawar, and there Asaf Khan would take delivery of them. The rifles were still in the satchel in Asaf Khan's room, and that night he and the banniah would place them in the chairs with their own hands, for no third person could be trusted in this matter.

It was ten o'clock, and Asaf Khan heard a sound in the courtyard. It was the banniah, he thought ; and drawing his satchel from under, he placed it upon the bed. His back was to the door, and ere he could turn, six policemen threw themselves upon him. He fought hard, but what can one do against six ? Nay, a dozen, for others poured in through the door. He was bound, and dragged to his feet.

And then he saw the woman, and knew who had done this thing. Before, he thought the banniah had betrayed him, but when he saw the woman in the background, he knew the truth. She smiled when she saw his look, and drawing her veil closely round her, came forward.

" This is the man of whom I told my brother," she said. " He came to my father's house and bought chairs to send to Peshawar ; and my father, not knowing how evil he was, gave him two that were by him and made a third. But I was not deceived. He was no trader. Pathan traders take our money, but spare our women. This man did otherwise, for he spoke shameful words which I cannot repeat. Then I watched him. In his satchel are the rifles, for I saw him take them out one night."

The banniah arrived while she was speaking, and motioning Asaf Khan to remain silent, began volubly to excuse himself and to abuse Asaf Khan for deceiving him. But the English officer was not deceived. He could see how the land lay, though on one point he was in error ; for he thought the banniah had betrayed the Pathan, meaning thus to quieten

the rumours that were afloat regarding his friendship with these men of the Border.

Asaf Khan was taken to the thana, and there locked up to think over his sins ; while the woman went to her chamber rejoicing in what she had done, and the banniah, drawing his son aside, abused him roundly for a fool. Then it all came out, and the banniah stamped in his rage. He was not blind, and had guessed what the woman would be at ; but she was a widow, and he did not interfere. If there was a scandal, he could turn her out, and there would be one mouth less to feed. Now this fool of a boy had butted in, and every rifle thief would distrust him. It might be even that some night he would waken to find a knife at his throat !

The boy had got him into this trouble, the boy must get him out ; or he would go on a pilgrimage and make rich gifts to the temples and the Brahmins. Much wealth would then remain at his death ! The sergeant had the keys of the handcuffs and the cells ; well, the sergeant must be brought to him forthwith.

Police sergeants are but men, and the pay of a sergeant is not great. And so at two o'clock that night Asaf Khan's handcuffs were unlocked by a muffled figure that led him forth from his cell and disappeared.

Now of all things Asaf Khan expected this least ; for he knew not of the banniah's son who was a policeman ; and he thought it a trap. But why they laid this trap for him he could not imagine. Perhaps they thought he would escape to the dwelling of some

friend, and that by following him they would seize other rifle thieves. Let them think so, the fools, he would soon show them otherwise. Stealing silently through the village streets, he came to the house of the banniah.

When the police seized Asaf Khan outside Sohawa, they took nothing from him, meaning to search him on arrival at Rawalpindi. But he might not be so fortunate another time, so while he dwelt in the house of the banniah, Asaf Khan kept his jewels and money under the floor of his room. For these he now returned.

But it was not in Asaf Khan's mind to go and leave with the banniah the quarter share he had given the man in advance. The rifles were gone, and could not now be recovered ; but that he should return home poorer than when he set out was not to be thought of. It was through the woman he must work this thing. He knew her chamber, and after he had recovered his money, he tapped lightly on her door.

Wonderingly she opened it, and when she saw Asaf Khan she drew back in alarm. But his face wore not the threatening aspect she feared ; it was grimly humorous, and he held out his hand before him.

"Thou art indeed a woman," he said, "for thou would'st do aught to get thy man. I thought thee like the women of Hindustan ; but thou hast the spirit of a Border woman, and art fit to be a warrior's bride ! Come then, and we will flee together. But thou wilt not be the bride of a rich man. I am poor ;

for the little I had I gave thy father, and now that the rifles are gone I am poor indeed."

Then the heart of the woman leapt with joy, and she burned again with love. It was only because he despised her as poor of spirit that he had repulsed her. Now he knew her as she was, he would love her—might even wed her!

"Thou art poor," she whispered, "but my father has much money. I know where he hides it; let us take this money and then flee."

It was what Asaf Khan wanted; but he hid the exultation in his eyes, and bade her bring the money. Hiding himself in the shadow of the door, he waited; and soon the woman came with the bag.

"It is jewellery and gold," she whispered. "Silver I brought not, for silver is heavy."

Asaf Khan weighed the bag in his hands. Then seizing the woman, before she could scream he gagged her and bound her hand and foot with his turban. Next he woke the banniah, and showing him the bag, told him what the woman would have done.

"Give me my due," he said, "the money that I paid thee for the rifles to be sent to Peshawar, and I shall be content. As for the woman, see that she be kept in confinement till I am safe, then do with her as thou wilt."

Banniah though he was, the man gave Asaf Khan the amount willingly; for had he not saved a far larger sum! Also Asaf Khan would speak well of him to his friends, and that would mean business.

This time Asaf Khan reached Peshawar, where he lost himself in the great city while he thought

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out other means of obtaining wealth ; but the woman was never seen again. Her father gave out that she had run away with a man ; and though, when her jewellery was seen on his son's wife, people wondered ; she was a widow, so nothing was said.

CHAPTER VII

HOW ASAF KHAN PAID A DEBT

THE great war in Europe affected many men in many lands, and among others it affected Asaf Khan. An order went forth in Peshawar that all men of the Border must return to their homes on pain of being put in jail ; and so Asaf Khan, being of the Border, must leave Peshawar.

But where to go he knew not. He could not go to his home, for in Kai was a great thirst for his blood ; to Afghanistan he would not go. Also he wished to be near his son in Peshawar, for the missionary had obtained permission for the boy to remain and pursue his studies. To the Mohmand country would he go, for the Mohmands were brave fighters, and their country was near Peshawar.

Asaf Khan was known by name in the land of the Mohmands, and they received him with open arms, asking many questions ; for strange rumours were afloat. Men said that a nation even greater than the English had attacked and invaded England. Others said it was another country this nation had invaded, but they had defeated the armies of this country

and were now preparing to invade England. Still others said it was England who had made war on this nation, and not this nation on England.

Whatever the truth might be, all were agreed on one point ; the English were sore beset, and every white soldier had been taken from India.

If this were true—and it must be true, for all men said it—what a glorious time awaited the men of the Border ! The rich lands of Hindustan would lie unprotected, and the warriors of the Border had only to sweep down and possess them.

What a burnishing of arms ! What an oiling of guns ! In a few days the last of the white soldiers, those at Peshawar and Nowshers, would be taken away ; then would come the day of plunder and loot !

But time passed, and still the white soldiers left not. Nay, men said there were more, that new men had come out from England. But this could not be. How could England, herself sore beset, send out soldiers to guard India ?

And so the jirgahts sat and the lashkars were formed ; waiting the day when the Amir Kabul would give the word. They must wait for him ; for when they went to Hindustan they would all go ; and if the Afghans went not with them, it might be that on their return the men of the Border would find Afghans in possession of their lands.

Days passed ; but still the Amir made no sign, and now came men from Hindustan, young men, who told them of a great rising of the Sikhs. They were young men of much learning, and said they came from places of learning in Lahore called colleges,

and one called himself a B.A., whatever that may be.

But Asaf Khan looked at the young men who came to the Mohmand country, and he doubted. He had learned much when in Hindustan, and he had heard that many years before, when there was a great rising of the people of Hindustan against the English, the Sikhs had been faithful to their salt and had helped the English to quell the rising. He questioned these young men before the jirgah, for this, being a famous warrior, he was allowed to do, though not a Mohmand, and at their answers he doubted still more.

None of the Indian troops had yet risen ; and though the young men said all the troops were ready to rise, Asaf Khan doubted this also. And the young men spoke little of how the fighting was to be done, nor did they offer to lead the fighting men. But they spoke much of how they would rule the country afterwards, so that each man would get his fair share of this world's goods and be happy.

But this was foolishness. The tribes they induced to Hindustan would not go to get their fair share, but to get as much as they could. Also this talk of the young men governing the land afterwards amused him. They had learned from many books and could repeat what men had said, many men ; but of themselves they could say nothing. Also, if there were a rising in Hindustan and the English were driven out, it would be the fighting men who would possess the land and rule it as seemed best to them, not the boys who learned in schools.

But though Asaf Khan doubted, many who had not been to Hindustan believed the young men ; and many,

who had been there, pretended to believe them. For whether the people of Hindustan rose or not, the white soldiers were certainly being taken away. When they were gone, the men of the Border would go to Hindustan and would bring therefrom much loot. Let the young men govern Hindustan afterwards if they liked—if the others in Hindustan would let them.

Now Asaf Khan was a known warrior ; but when he presently began to warn the Mohmands and say that all was not well, there was much murmuring, for men's minds were greatly disturbed by the strange rumours now afloat on the Border. It was said that the Afridis would not join the tribes. The Afridis, the greatest and most warlike tribe on the Border would not join the tribes in this invasion of Hindustan. If they joined not, it might be the Orakzais would not join, nor the men of Buner ; and without these three, the Afridis, the Orakzais, and the Bunerwal, the tribes would be weak. The young men of Hindustan left for Kabul ; and in a few days came news that caused men to stare in wonder, asking each other if this thing could really be.

The Amir had seized these young men and cast them into prison ! What a fool the Amir was ! Now was his chance to march into Hindustan ; to loot it and return as Mahmud of Ghazni and Nadir Shah of Persia had done, or to found such another empire as Akbar's—and he refused !

But the Amir was no fool. On his hither side were the English, and on his further side the Russe. If he took his troops to Hindustan, who would keep out

the Russe ? England and Russe were, he knew, fighting on the same side ; when they were defeated it would be time for him to act. Were they in the end victorious, he would be safe only if he now remained their friend.

The Amir was far, and he was the Amir, but Asaf Khan was close, and though he was a great warrior, he was only a man, not even a Khan. He was growing old, and it may be—but this was said in whispers—that his spirit was not as high as in the days of his youth. So black looks and the scarcely veiled sneer, now met Asaf Khan when he walked abroad, Ill could he brook such treatment from these men of little worth ; and leaving their country, he went to Waziristan.

Now the Waziris were of two minds. Some would join with the tribes, and some would not. At first all would have joined ; but when the war first began, some of the Mussulmans of Hindustan who dwelt not far from the land of the Waziris, trusting to idle rumour, had risen ; and marching through the country, had raided the houses of rich Hindus and had gained much wealth. But this wealth remained not with them, for many armed police came, and with them white soldiers. From place to place were the rebels hunted. Most of them were seized and put in prison or hanged, and those who escaped must spend the remainder of their lives in exile.

One thing this taught the Waziris. They could expect no help from the Mussulmans of Hindustan, who were no longer the warriors they had once been. They were brave when they thought the British

Raj was overthrown, and they plundered and murdered the Hindus right gaily ; but when the police came, they ran and hid ! If the tribes would invade Hindustan, they must trust to their own strength.

All the tribes were not of one mind, and it would be wiser to wait, said the greybeards. The Amir of Kabul had made no sign, nor would he see the messengers sent to him from the tribes. But the young men were impatient, and when the Mahsuds raised the banner of Islam and began to invade Hindustan, they could not be restrained. The Mahsuds were cowards, and yet they dared to brave the English. Were the Waziris cowards ? Should they skulk in their mountain fastnesses for the Mahsuds to jeer at ?

And so there were two parties. But the young men were the stronger, and even many of the elder men, remembering the days of their youth, joined in desiring war. In vain the old men pleaded for patience. Patience—or cowardice ? They could not see the difference, said the young men. They were warriors and fighting men ! They knew naught of Patience !

Now Asaf Khan wished not to leave the country of the Waziris ; so he remained silent, and when he saw that the young men would prevail, he joined his voice to theirs in urging the elders to war. It was enough. Though not a Waziri, Asaf Khan was a famous warrior ; and when he said war, the elders allowed themselves to be persuaded. And so the word went forth.

From the mountains they came, and from the

hidden valley. Every fighting man came ; and when all were assembled it was a great host, a host that none could stop, said the Waziris ; and though Asaf Khan smiled when he thought of the number of white soldiers he had seen in Hindustan, he said naught. He had urged on the war, for had he remained silent, the Waziris might have treated him as the Mohmands had done, and this a second time he could not bear. But he was not of them ; and he stood apart from the gathering, nor would he take part in their councils.

“ Wilt make me a leader ? ” he asked when they urged him ; and this they could not do. He was a great warrior, but he was an Afridi, not a Waziri, and so could not be put in authority over Waziris. “ Then let me be,” he said. “ Decide what ye will do, and let me know. But this I say ; if I may not be over men, I shall be under no man. I have eaten your salt, and will fight for ye ; but I will fight under no leader. I shall be my own leader and my own following.”

And so the preparations were made, till the day came when all was ready and the Waziris marched forth to war and the conquest of Hindustan.

How these things come to pass, no man knoweth. Some say it is the English gold, some the English magic. None knoweth ; but certain it is that when a tribe would invade Hindustan, the English have word of their coming and are prepared to oppose them. And so it was now.

For three days the Waziri host moved through the mountain defiles, their banners flying and their shrill pipes echoing to the hills ; and coming to the lower

ranges they halted while spies went forth to see if the way was clear.

It was not clear. A host encamped on the plain without. Not such a host as the Waziris, but these were white soldiers and would be armed as the Waziris were not armed, so that one white soldier would be equal to two, perhaps three Waziris. What now? To advance were madness, to retire, shame. Allah was great, and he had made these English foolish. If a trick could be devised, these English could be overcome; and the Waziris assembled in council.

Many plans were suggested for putting the English to confusion, but all were rejected. The young men rejected the plans of the elders, for they savoured too much of—caution, or cowardice? The elders condemned the plans of the young men as rash and foolish. For three days they talked, and then there was no further need; for the English now advanced to meet the Waziris in their own mountains.

It was good. The Waziris were men of the mountains, and on their own ground they would be more than a match for the English soldiers. These must be the last of those left in Hindustan; when they were all slain, as they soon would be, the Waziris could march on Hindustan unopposed. The valley was a broad one, and massing at the further end and at the foot of the mountains on either hand, they awaited the coming of the English.

But now fresh news was brought by the watchers, strange news. All the white soldiers were not advancing. Not more than a quarter marched from the camp towards the mountains, and the Waziris won-

dered what this might mean. Surely these men were mad ! Even had all come, the Waziris would have outnumbered them, what could this small handful do ?

Perhaps they would halt when they reached the outer foothills. But no, still they advanced, throwing out skirmishers in front and on either hand. Allah must have driven these white men mad, and now sent them to be slain at the hands of the Faithful. Now the white soldiers were in the defile leading to the valley. Their scouts on the hills must see the Waziris. They did, for they waved flags ; but still the white men advanced. And now the Waziris felt uneasy.

What strange thing could this portend ? The white men knew they were there. The white men knew their numbers. And still the white men came on !

The white men entered the valley ; and now they halted. Partly in the valley and partly in the defile they halted ; and to the amazement of the Waziris, they began to build a great barricade of rocks !

What strange doings were these ? Did the white men entrench themselves, thinking the Waziris would seek to storm the wall and so lose many men in a useless attempt ? Surely they knew the Waziris were warriors, not children. It almost seemed as if these white men sought to block the way and so prevent the escape of the Waziris. Escape from what ? And why should they seek to escape in that direction ? Was not the way open by which they had come ?

And now the wall was built, a strong wall and high, and behind it the white men took their stand. But

they fired no shot, and at the further end of the valley the Waziris stood wondering.

What was that ? A dull, droning sound was heard, a sound no Waziri had ever heard before, and they looked at one another in alarm. Was this some fresh magic of the English ? Some magic of which the Tribes knew not ? The sound increased in volume ; yet no man could say what made it nor whence it came. It filled the air with a dull, throbbing note of menace, and fear fell upon the host. Men they feared not, for they were warriors ; but jinns that made a sound and yet were invisible were terrors no man could withstand. And then one saw it, and with a great cry pointed upwards.

It was there ! It was overhead ! The jinn ! And even as they looked they saw another ! A third ! A fourth ! Full ten jinns they counted in the sky, looking like great bats, and filling the air with their moan. Unable to speak, unable to move, they stood staring at the dreadful sight. Onward swept the jinns, onward till they reached the entrance to the valley, and here they dropped lower and began to circle slowly as they advanced up the defile.

With a wild cry the Waziris broke and fled, but it was too late. Down swooped the jinns ; and now some saw that afrits rode on the backs of these jinns, devils with great goggle eyes ! And as they recoiled at the sight, these devils began to cast down balls which fell and burst among them ; killing men by tens and by twenties. Screaming they ran to the sides ; but the jinns pursued, sweeping still lower so that the afrits could play their part. Guns these afrits had,

guns which poured out a never ceasing stream of lead ; and mad with fear the Waziris turned to the mouth of the defile. But the wall was here, and the guns of the soldiers withered them as with a blast of fire, so that they turned again and made in desperation for the other end of the valley. The jinns were ready, and again the balls fell from the sky, blowing men to fragments, rending them limb from limb, so that the valley was strewn with their pieces.

Shrieking, they ran like rats about the valley, and ever the jinns and devils pursued. The sides were too steep to climb, and at either end was death. At last a remnant collected, and with a desperate rush broke through the rain of balls the jinns let fall. Escaping up the defile by which they had come, they scattered over the hills far and wide, heedless where they went, their only thought to escape those terrible jinns and afrits.

Asaf Khan was not with them. He knew more of the English than the Waziris did ; and when the wall was built across the mouth of the valley, he knew it was not built for naught. The wall had been built to prevent the escape of the Waziris in that direction, and the English would not have troubled to build it had they not been certain the Waziris would be unable to escape by the way they had come. How it was to be done, Asaf Khan could not guess, but done it would be ; and long before the coming of the jinns he went back up the defile, and climbing the side, returned and concealed himself in a bush where he could overlook the valley. Then came the jinns, and the slaughter began.

Asaf Khan lay hid in his bush. Never had he dreamed of such a thing. So the English by their magic summoned the jinns to fight their battles for them. His thoughts turned to the Englishman he had called friend in Peshawar, and for some strange reason he felt sad at heart. When he had spoken to the Englishman of magic, the Englishman laughed, declaring that magic was foolishness, and that tales of jinns and afrits were old women's tales to frighten children with. But here were the English using magic and jinns, so the Englishman must have deceived him.

All is fair in war, and Asaf Khan never hesitated to deceive an enemy ; but that the Englishman could do so made him feel sad. He had believed all the Englishman had said, though some of his words were hard to believe ; but in this the Englishman had deceived him. Must he then cast from his mind all the Englishman had said ? Also the Englishman had called him friend, and friend does not deceive friend. But so it was. The Englishman had said that magic was foolishness, and here were the English using magic. The Englishman had said the jinns and afrits existed only in old women's tales, and here were jinns and afrits destroying the Waziris.

Hid safely in his bush he watched the Waziris being hunted like rats in the valley below ; and in spite of the demons that hovered overhead, a grim smile passed over his features as he thought of the way the Waziris had talked of conquering Hindustan. Once a jinn passed near him, and he felt half inclined to put a bullet through the afrit seated on its back ; but he restrained himself. How could he harm a

spirit ? The bullet would pass through, and the afrit would not even know of its passage ; but the report might attract the attention of the devil ! Asaf Khan shuddered at the thought.

At last all was over. Only the desperately wounded and the dead lay in the valley ; and then, such is the strange way of the English, through a gap in the wall came coolies and doctors who sought out the wounded, and bandaging their hurts, carried them away to be cured of their wounds. Asaf Khan thought of the fate of the English had the Waziris been victorious, and he wondered anew, as he never ceased to wonder, at the strange ways of the English. He still lay hid ; for though most of the jinns had returned to the English camp, one remained circling over the valley ; and it was not till night fell that he dared move from his bush.

In the dark he could not go far ; but he made shift to climb over the crest of the range, and at dawn he was up and away.

Where should he go now ? He could remain in Waziristan ; but would the English be content with their victory ? Would they be satisfied with keeping the Waziris out of Hindustan, or would they themselves invade Waziristan ? If they did, he would have to leave ; he might as well leave now. He would climb the mountains and go whither fate directed him.

By noon he was twelve miles from the valley, and sat down in the shade of a bush to rest. Not that he was tired ; but he had not eaten since the previous day, and when a man's stomach is empty and he

knows not when he will next fill it, it behoves him to conserve his strength. It might be that the food must be taken by force, and a weak man would have little chance of doing that. After resting for about an hour, he rose and continued his journey till sundown. He was now quite twenty miles from the valley, and wondered in which country he was. He had passed one or two villages, but they were empty, the people evidently having taken refuge in the higher hills. Or else the men had gone to join the Waziri lashkars while the women and children drove the cattle to the higher mountains.

And then he heard a drone. It was a sound he had heard before, a sound he would never forget ; and diving into the nearest bush, he lay hid till the jinn should pass. He could see it high in the sky towards the west, and as he watched, the drone suddenly ceased. Perhaps the afrit riding on the jinn wished to travel in silence and so come upon his prey unseen and unheard.

But the jinn changed its course. Instead of continuing its journey, it began to descend in circles. Lower and lower it came, and to Asaf Khan's consternation it appeared over the flat on the corner of which stood the bush in which he lay hid. Down it came in a silence broken only by the rushing sound of its great wings, till with a last circling swoop it alighted on the flat.

Alighting at the further end, it rushed across the open space and came to a halt not a dozen yards from his bush ; and Asaf Khan hid his face in fear. The afrit would smell him out, and of a surety would

devour him. Those others had returned to the English camp when their work was done ; but they were near the English and under their command. This afrit was far from the English and would do as his nature commanded ; and the nature of an afrit is to eat men.

For some moments he lay, scarce daring to breathe ; but as the afrit did not molest him, Asaf Khan's courage returned presently in a measure.

But what was this strange sound that struck upon his ear ? Many white men had he seen when he dwelt as a rifle thief at Ambala ; and though he knew not their language, he was familiar with the sound of it. It was this sound he now heard, the sound of words the English use when they are angry. Puzzled, he peered through the leaves ; and his eyes opened in a wide stare of amazement.

The jinn rested close enough for him to see its every part, and the afrit stood on the ground beside it. The afrit ! Asaf Khan stroked his beard and softly called himself seventy kinds of fools. The afrit ! The jinn, too ! What sort of a jinn was this, that was made of wood and metal, and painted ? A jinn that had wheels under it ! And the afrit ! He, Asaf Khan, had fled and hid in terror from a man-made machine and a man ! A man ? Nay, a boy ! For the cap and goggles thrown aside, above the rough, thick, airman's suit showed the head of an English youth.

Without a sound, Asaf Khan brought his rifle to his shoulder ; but even as his finger was on the trigger he paused. Something about the youth caught his eye, recalling a memory. The youth had golden hair

and blue eyes even as Asaf Khan's son had ; but it was not of his son that this English youth made him think. It was something more elusive. Somewhere he had seen someone whom this youth resembled ; and for the sake of this resemblance he could not press the trigger. It might be a friend ; it might be an enemy ; but Asaf Khan knew he could not slay this youth. He would stay hidden till the youth had mended his machine and flown away. What wonderful people these English were ! They could even make machines that flew ! For now he scorned the idea of magic. It must be some engine that drove this machine through the air, even as an engine hurled the fire carriages along the iron way in Hindustan.

For many minutes the youth busied himself with the machine—Asaf Khan smiled grimly at finding himself calling it the jinn—but apparently the damage was beyond repair, or else he was in want of something ; for he searched every part of the machine, and at length stood apart regarding it moodily.

And then with cat-like tread Asaf Khan stole from the bush. The youth's back was turned, and the first he knew of Asaf Khan's presence was when he felt the muzzle of a rifle pressed between his shoulder blades.

Asaf Khan smiled approval. He had expected the youth to start—perhaps to leap in the air at the unexpected contact ; but the youth did neither. With a swift movement he turned, knocking aside the rifle barrel as he did so, and the next moment he had Asaf Khan by the throat.

This youth had the spirit of a man ; but with the

spirit of a man this youth also possessed almost the strength of one, and his hands pressed hard on Asaf Khan's throat. Asaf Khan had wrists of steel, and in a few seconds he had released himself and cast his opponent to the ground, snatching the revolver from the youth's belt as he did so.

The youth sat up ; but levelling the revolver at his head, Asaf Khan bade him be still. He was not afraid, Asaf Khan saw that, but to rise in the face of the revolver was madness ; and for a little while the two stared at each other. Then the youth took a cigarette from his pouch and lit it. Asaf Khan grunted. Truly this was no ordinary youth. He appeared not to know the meaning of fear ; and something tempted Asaf Khan to try him further.

He spoke in Pusto, but the youth shook his head. He spoke in Hindustani, and this the youth understood, though he spoke it badly.

" You are my prisoner," said Asaf Khan.

The youth nodded.

" Know you what we do with our prisoners ? "

" Kill them," replied the youth laconically. " But let me finish this cigarette first."

Asaf Khan passed his hand across his mouth to hide a smile.

" Art not afraid of death ? "

The youth pointed to the aeroplane. " If this flat had not been here, I and that would have been smashed to pieces. I go up in it every day. Do you still wish to know if I fear death ? "

Asaf Khan nodded. Of a truth this youth had cour-

age. But he would try him still further. The cigarette was finished.

“ Shall I shoot now, or would you smoke again ? ”

The youth's face was pale, but there was no tremor in his voice when he replied :

“ I have a God, even as you have. Let me recommend my soul to the mercy of my God, and then shoot.”

“ Wah ! ” Casting rifle and revolver to the ground, Asaf Khan stepped forward with outstretched hand. “ Thou art indeed brave, and my heart warms to thee. I shall not slay thee, I shall help thee return to thy comrades.”

Scrambling to his feet, the youth grasped the outstretched hand.

“ Good,” he said. “ I was not afraid, but I am glad you have changed your mind.”

“ I never intended to slay thee.”

The youth raised his eyebrows, and Asaf Khan explained.

“ I could have slain thee from yonder bush where I lay hid ; but somehow I could not. There is that about thee that reminds me of another, though who that other is I know not.”

“ How shall we get to where the English are ? ”

This was an obvious question, but the answer was not so obvious.

Asaf Khan knitted his brows in thought. The English youth said the machine would not fly, that something was broken which he could not mend. They must then return on foot, and this would be no easy task. All the country was up, and the border

would be alive with men. To break through this cordon would be impossible, to steal through it unperceived would be almost as impossible. Alone he might have succeeded, but this English youth could not tread as he trod, nor move in the darkness as he moved.

But he was hungry, and the English youth had taken food from the machine. After he had eaten they would think out a way of escape. There was not much, for the youth had taken with him merely a few sandwiches in case he was hungry before returning to the camp, but after eating, Asaf Khan tackled the problem with more confidence.

He did not know exactly where he was, but he knew he had not wandered far from the frontier. The sun had set, but if they started at once, they could go some distance before dark. This part could be passed over by daylight, but afterwards they must make their way in the dark; and by day he would go over the ground they must cover by night. They drank at a running stream and started; but before they left, the youth asked Asaf Khan how long it would take them to reach the English camp.

"We may never reach it," replied Asaf Khan, grimly.

"But if we do?"

"We may take two days, or three; not more. If we are not in the English camp on the third day, it will be because we are dead."

"Three days," muttered the youth, "and one day to return." Taking from the machine an instrument like a clock, he wound and set it. "If I do not

return by the fourth day, this will explode," he explained to Asaf Khan, "and it will destroy the aeroplane." He smashed a Lewis gun and a few instruments, and then declared himself ready to start.

Asaf Khan led the way. With the long swinging stride of the Pathan he set out, and it was not until they had walked for an hour that he thought of the youth who followed. This youth was English, and could not climb hills as he, Asaf Khan, did ; and he halted with a smile. To his surprise the youth was breathing easily, and looked as if he had just started. Asaf Khan did not know the youth came from Wales, and that he had spent the year before the war mountaineering among the Rockies. He nodded gravely at this extraordinary English youth, and resumed his stride.

A little before dark they found a cave ; and as the youth must lie hid next day while Asaf Khan sought a route to safety, they halted, and making a fire, prepared to rest for the night. There was nothing to eat ; for though men were near, as could be seen by the fires that burned on the hills, Asaf Khan would not seek them. Food he could have obtained for himself ; but he could not bring food for his companion without exciting suspicion. His friend rather, for he had eaten this youth's salt ; and Asaf Khan smiled at the thought. He whose friendship all men sought, mostly in vain, had given it unasked to this youth he had known but a few hours. The fire was a bright one, for with so many fires starring the hills no one would notice theirs ; and by the light of the

flames he studied his companion's face, wondering at the memories it evoked.

And then he knew. The flickering light sharpened the youth's features, making him appear a score of years older, and Asaf Khan knew.

"Who is thy father?" he asked abruptly; and when the answer came, it was even as he had expected.

"My father? My father is in the army. He is Major Markham. He used to be in Peshawar, but now he is in camp with the force to which I belong. I was in England; but when the war broke out I joined the flying corps and came out to India. Have you ever met my father? Do you know him?"

Asaf Khan smiled at the question. Major Markham had saved his life when they would have hanged him for a Ghazi; and Major Markham's son asked him if he knew his father! And then his blood ran cold. Almost had he slain this youth! He threw his hands aloft.

"Thanks be to Allah who has had mercy on his servant! Thy father saved my life; and but for the mercy of Allah I would have slain thee! Great is Allah, and wrapped in mystery are his ways!"

"Good!" and the youth drew a sigh of relief. "Of a truth, though I seemed to trust thee, I nevertheless doubted; and always have I been on my guard. Now I know thou speakest the truth and I have naught to fear. Art offended?"

Offended? Asaf Khan chuckled with delight. This was no raw youth. His years might be few, but in all else he was a man, a warrior: He knew not fear; he kept his head, however great the surprise; he

could deceive an astute man like Asaf Khan. For all this while Asaf Khan had thought the youth trusted him utterly, and to find the youth thus able to disguise his real feelings pleased Asaf Khan mightily.

At dawn Asaf Khan left the youth within the cave, and making his way over the mountains, came presently to where there were men. Waziris they were, though not of the lashkar the jinns had destroyed in the valley. But they were Waziris, for when the English threatened to invade Waziristan it behoved all faithful men to arm in the defence of their land. Some knew Asaf Khan, and greeting him, asked news of the lashkar ; but Asaf Khan declared he knew naught of it, having left the day before it reached the valley. This he said, for he did not wish to be detained ; had these men known the truth, they would have kept him with their questions all day. He asked food, which they gave him, and which he tied in his cloth with the excuse that he was in a hurry and would eat as he walked. He did not say where he would go, but vaguely mentioned that he sought a friend to deliver a message from his brother who had accompanied the lashkar.

All was well while he walked in the mountains ; but when he approached the lower hills, he met suspicious looks. He was not a Waziri ; what did he where the Waziris watched their deadly enemy the English ? Many men took hold to betray the secrets of the tribes, and though Asaf Khan was a known warrior, it was also known that he had few scruples where his own welfare was in question.

But he must survey the whole route, and this part

would be the most difficult to traverse at night. To omit this portion was to foredoom the attempt. With grim set jaw he strode on, parrying the questions put to him and returning scowl for scowl, till, his work done, he turned and retraced his steps to the cave where he had left the English youth.

Not openly did he return, for he soon knew that men dogged his footsteps. They doubted him, and therefore followed to see where he would go. But this troubled Asaf Khan little. If these men would follow him, they must be men as good as he, and this he doubted. Sitting beside a stream, he ate heartily of the food he had been given, and then, after a drink, he started. Uphill he went, and downhill. No path did he follow, nor was any hill too steep nor any chasm too deep. Climbing up the sheer face of cliffs where a goat could scarce find foothold. Sliding down to the brink of precipices, and saving himself only at the last moment by grasping a bush. No ordinary man could stand the strain, and one by one the pursuers gave up till none were left. Then went Asaf Khan to the cave, and found the English youth sitting outside.

The youth greeted him with a smile, and setting the food before him, Asaf Khan explained the route and told the youth what must be done if they would win through to safety. With his mouth full, the youth nodded understanding, and when the sun set they started.

Asaf Khan led, the youth followed closely, and for some time they travelled swiftly; but soon the darkness grew, and they had to proceed more warily.

The way was rough, and moreover they were now near men whose ears were sharp to catch the slightest sound; they must move in perfect silence. Asaf Khan stole onward like a shadow, but not so the English youth. More than once he made a false step, and the rattle of pebbles down the hillside sounded like thunder in their strained ears. Always they would pause on such occasions till they were certain the sound had not been heard.

They passed over three-quarters of their journey without mishap, and then, misjudging his step, the English youth fell with a crash. The noise was too loud to pass unnoticed, and immediately a voice hailed them to know who they were. The questioner was hidden in the gloom, and guessing the man had judged their direction from the sound, Asaf Khan turned sharply to the right, and hurrying a short distance, sank down behind a great boulder, pulling the youth down beside him.

Breathlessly they waited. Footsteps approached the place where they had been, and presently they heard the voices of men who searched in the darkness for the one who had made the noise. To their relief the voices passed on and were presently lost in the distance. They were reprieved and, leading the way back to the path, Asaf Khan resumed his journey.

But now they must be doubly wary. Here were many men, and they must have heard the commotion. They would now be on the alert, and the slightest noise would betray the fugitives. Asaf Khan turned on his companion impatiently.

“Thou treadest like an elephant ! Canst not step more softly ? ”

The English youth shrugged his shoulders. “I am not used to walking in darkness. But we will get through. I wish I could smoke, but I suppose it would not be safe.”

Asaf Khan snorted. It was all very well for this youth to be cool, but he sought only to save himself ; were he seeking to save a friend, as Asaf Khan was doing, he would not be so cool. They had proceeded barely a dozen yards, when the youth kicked a stone, which went rolling and clattering down the hill.

With a groan, Asaf Khan dragged the youth from the path. That they would escape detection a second time was hardly possible ; and he thought rapidly. At all costs the son of his friend must be saved, but how ? There was only one way.

“Stay thou here,” he whispered. “I shall go forth and meet them.”

“But they will seize you.”

“What of it ? Am I not a Pathan as they are ? ”

The youth shook his head. “You are not a Waziri. Already they suspect you—you told me so on your return this evening. They would call you traitor and would slay you.”

Asaf Khan shrugged his shoulders. “Both cannot escape. I am no child, nor am I unknown. They dare not condemn me without fair trial, for I am an Afridi ; and ere they could bring me before their jirgah I would escape.” He smiled as he thought of the jirgah. Little chance would he have of being brought before a jirgah ; but the youth would believe,

and it was well. "Stay thou here. I will go and meet them; and when they take me hence, do thou escape. Keep straight along the path, and in two hours wilt thou be on British ground."

"And you?"

Asaf Khan turned on the youth in exasperation. "I told thee I was in no danger!"

"It is a lie," returned the youth coolly. "They would shoot you on sight, at the latest, to-morrow. We will escape together, or we will be captured together."

Steps were now converging on the place where the stone had rolled, and Asaf Khan seized the youth by the shoulder.

"Fool!" he hissed. "I am Asaf Khan! When I say a thing shall be, that thing shall be! I will lead them hence. I will draw away all who guard the path. When thou hast regained thy senses, escape over the border; the way will be clear. Farewell, son of my friend!" and with his clubbed rifle he struck the youth senseless.

The next moment he was up and away, bounding towards the men. But before reaching them he dropped down the hill, laughing aloud as he did so.

"Ho!" he called. "Who will catch Asaf Khan! Asaf Khan the warrior! Asaf Khan the thunderbolt! Asaf Khan who can out-run, out-climb, and catch the wild sheep of the mountain! Who will catch Asaf Khan! 'la! 'la!"

And so he ran, boasting and calling, till all the country was astir. But always he ran so as to draw the guards further from the path. Escape for himself

was impossible, but he would save the son of his friend. The youth would recover presently, and knowing he could do nothing to help Asaf Khan, would escape to British ground. Thus would Asaf Khan pay the debt he owed the man who saved his life at Peshawar.

For an hour he ran, but ever they closed upon him ; and at last came the end. Ever had he kept parallel to the path so as to draw the men from it ; and now he must collect them in one place. He branched off to the left, and after turning for a while, turned and faced his pursuers. He must have hidden, and in the darkness they may have passed him ; but then some would return to the path. He would keep them in one place till the youth had passed to safety. Seating himself on a rock, he called to his pursuers.

“ Here I am ! ” he called, “ I, Asaf Khan ! Come, friends who seek my company so eagerly, Asaf Khan awaits thee ! ”

In another moment he was surrounded by a ring of men with fierce, scowling faces, and one lit a torch.

“ Asaf Khan the traitor ! ” growled one. “ What does Asaf Khan here ? ”

“ That is my business, friend,” replied Asaf Khan blandly. The youth must have recovered by now. He would parley with the men, and so keep their attention distracted from suspicious sounds. “ Who is thy leader ? I talk not with common men ! ”

A great burly ruffian pushed through the crowd ; and he was a cousin of the Orakzai maiden Asaf Khan had left with an old shoe. Asaf Khan laughed aloud, for he recognized the man.

“What news?” he cried. “What news of Asaf Khan’s would-be bride?”

The man looked at him darkly. “The woman has never wed. She will wed only the man who will come and tell her Asaf Khan is dead.”

“It is well,” replied Asaf Khan. “It is thou and I. This man and I,” and he turned to the crowd, “will fight, he choosing the weapons; and the victor shall go his way.”

But this did not suit the man. Asaf Khan was a great warrior, and his fame was in all men’s mouths. It would be great honour to slay Asaf Khan, but suppose Asaf Khan slew him? The woman said she would wed the one who brought her news of Asaf Khan’s death. He could take this news without having himself to slay Asaf Khan. He smiled, maliciously.

“I am of Orakzai,” he said, “and though I have come to help the Waziris against their enemy, I am not a Waziri. Let the Waziris deal with the traitor who would betray them.”

Now, though no one had voiced it, this thought was in the minds of many men; and at the words of the man, a sullen murmur arose.

Asaf Khan laughed lightly. He played a desperate game, a well-nigh hopeless one, but he did not yet despair. It was time he wanted; time to think. He had been so intent on drawing the guard from the path and in wondering if the youth had yet escaped. that he had no time to think of himself. If he could delay the end till morning, in the interval he might think of a plan. His face grew dark.

“Do as ye will,” he said harshly. “I would have told ye the reason for my coming, but ye call me traitor! Now I will not speak. Till morning shall ye wait for the good news I bring!”

The men crowded round him curiously.

“What news?” they asked. “We called thee not traitor. What news?”

Asaf Khan shook his head. “In the morning will I tell, not before.”

The man of the Orakzai laughed. “He has naught to tell. It is but an excuse to make ye forget what he would have done. If he has news, why told he not this news during the day? What does he here now, in the darkness? Was he seeking ye, or sought he to escape over the border? Good news!” and the man laughed loudly.

It was true, and again black looks were turned on Asaf Khan.

“He was with the lashkar that went out against the English?” muttered one.

“He was! He was!” echoed others. “What news of the lashkar, Asaf Khan?”

Asaf Khan knew not what to reply. He dared not say the lashkar was defeated. He could not say it had been victorious, else had all the hills long since been lit with bonfires of joy.

“It is of the lashkar I bring news”—he hesitated—“They have not yet left the hills, for they have changed their plans. It is of this I bring word, but I will not speak till morning. I, Asaf Khan have been called traitor! Dogs! I will speak only

when it pleases me ! And if it pleases me, I will not speak at all ! ”

The men pressed him with questions, but he refused to answer. “ In the morning,” was all he would say, and at length they desisted.

“ Now go and guard the paths,” said Asaf Khan. “ If ye doubt me, let two remain to guard me till morning. A dozen if ye will. But go now ; for the path must be watched—and I would sleep.”

They gazed at him open-mouthed, almost awed by his masterful tone. They would have gone, perhaps leaving none to guard him ; but the man of the Orakzai was not deceived. For some purpose of his own Asaf Khan had let them know his whereabouts, or in the darkness he would never have been caught. Should he escape again, he would not be so easily captured. The Orakzai whispered to some men, and now a dozen suddenly flung themselves on Asaf Khan. He struggled hard ; but they were a dozen, and soon his hands were tied securely behind his back. Asaf Khan knew whom he had to thank for this, and in the struggle he managed to get his teeth on the arm of the Orakzai ; nor would he let go till he felt his teeth meet in the flesh.

The man would have shot him ; but others interposed. After all, he was Asaf Khan, a great warrior, and no treachery had yet been proved against him. Putting four men to guard him, they went back to their posts and there was again silence on the hills.

Asaf Khan sat against a rock. It was the end. Escape he could not, for he was bound and four men watched him, one of them the Orakzai. In the

morning he would have nothing to tell, and he would be slain. What of it? Was he not a warrior? But he was sleepy, and rolling on his side, he was soon fast asleep.

At dawn came a messenger; and for a while Asaf Khan was forgotten by all except the Orakzai, who moved not, nor ever took his eyes off the prisoner. From the lashkar came the man, from the laskhar the English had destroyed; and the news he brought blanched every cheek and made men tremble. Jinns and afrits fought on the side of the English! The Tribes were lost! Men they could fight, but who can fight against jinns and afrits!

And then one thought of Asaf Khan. Asaf Khan had been with the lashkar. Asaf Khan must have known of this thing. Why did he not speak of it last night? He said he had good news! Surging to where Asaf Khan lay bound, they dragged him roughly to his feet and questioned him.

"I know naught," he growled. "For I left the lashkar three days ago. What foolish talk is this of jinns that fly through the air with a droning sound, dropping death and destruction on those below!"

"Ha!" and the messenger sprang forward. "How knowest thou, Asaf Khan, that they make a droning sound as they fly through the air? For this I had not mentioned!"

Asaf Khan bit his lips with vexation. But the mischief was done, and he read his doom in the faces of those around him.

"How do I know?" and he laughed aloud. "I was there! Yea, hidden safely on the hillside I

saw the Waziris hunted like rats in the valley below ! It was a merry sight ! Like rats they squeaked and scuttled from place to place, hunted by the jinns and afrits ! I saw it all ! More ; it was to help an Englishman escape I led ye from the path last night ! We were together, and his foot struck against a stone. Then did I lead ye away while he escaped to his friends. I did this ! I, Asaf Khan ! For I had a debt to pay, and I have paid it ! Now do as ye list ! ”

A score of hands were raised to slay him even while he mocked ; but others came between. For Asaf Khan, traitor though he be, was yet a warrior. He must not be slain like a dog. Also his death should be a warning to other would-be traitors. Let him be taken to the centre of the valley, and there let him be slain openly in the sight of all men. Some said he should be burnt, and this it was that made Asaf Khan anger them so that they should slay him outright ; but others thought of the Afridis. If they slew him as a traitor, the Afridis would say naught ; but should they burn an Afridi, they might be called to a reckoning by the tribe.

The latter prevailed, and in a few minutes Asaf Khan stood in the centre of the valley while the men cast lots who should slay him. And then there came a droning sound from the east, a droning moan that each moment grew louder. The messenger was the first to hear it, for he had heard it before ; and with a scream he fled. On it came, the jinn ! and seeing it, the Waziris fled, leaving Asaf Khan alone.

The Orakzai fled with the rest, but presently he

remembered Asaf Khan. If he could take word that Asaf Khan was dead, the woman would be his bride, and she had great wealth. His rifle he had given to another to hold while he drew the lot, but his knife he had with him. With long bounds he raced towards Asaf Khan.

Asaf Khan gnashed his teeth with fury. Must he be slain by this common man? Yet what could he do? His hands were bound, and to flee he scorned. On came the man, and on came the jinn. The man saw it, and for a moment he faltered in his stride; but the thought of the woman and her wealth spurred him on afresh. Asaf Khan, seeing and understanding, cursed all women. Always had women been his bane. Had it not been for a woman, this man had fled with the rest.

The man was no more than a dozen yards away, when a sharp report rang out from the jinn and the man collapsed, a crumpled heap on the ground. A moment later the aeroplane alighted on a grassy flat a hundred yards away, and leaping from his machine, the airman ran to Asaf Khan, snatching off his goggles as he ran. It was the youth Asaf Khan had saved.

"Just in time," he said with a laugh, untying Asaf Khan's hands. "Come along," and he raced back to the aeroplane.

Asaf Khan followed with many misgivings. He knew it was no jinn. He knew it was only a machine. But the thought of flying aloft, miles in the air, appalled him. The airman gave him little time for thought. Swinging himself into the machine, he

helped Asaf Khan to a seat behind, and with a whirr the propeller began to spin.

And then began an experience Asaf Khan will never forget. With a gentle swaying motion the aeroplane rose. At first Asaf Khan was not alarmed, thinking the machine had not yet left the ground ; but presently he glanced over the side—to gaze in fascinated horror at the earth a thousand feet below. He lay back gasping ; but an irresistible impulse compelled him again and again to gaze into the terrible abyss. What a distance ! For seeing his face of stupefied horror, the youth smiled quietly and sent the machine a thousand feet higher. Allah ! If he could only get out of this cursed thing ! Never would he put foot in another, not even to save his life.

How small and flat everything looked ! As flat as he would be were he to fall out ! The trees looked like small heaps of leaves, and the fields like a painted design. What was that white patch ? The English camp ! Already ! Of a truth this devil of a machine travelled like the wind.

And now the airman dipped the nose of the machine and began to descend in a great spiral. It was the limit. Stiffening his knees and grasping the sides convulsively, Asaf Khan waited resignedly the smash he was sure was coming. Down they swung, lower and lower. Now would come the end ; Asaf Khan repeated the Kalma and closed his eyes. With a rush the machine came to the ground, and Asaf Khan opened his eyes to see his English friend of Peshawar smiling up at him.



CHAPTER VIII

HOW ASAF KHAN RETURNED TO KAI

ASAF KHAN, Pathan, Afridi, sat outside the tent and thought. He was now not far from Kai, not more than twenty miles, and to Kai, his home, he wished to return. Not to stay—after the Defence of the House that might not be—but he had a few accounts to settle in Kai, and he would that he might visit that village if only for a little while. He had heard that thirty men died that day. Thirty men. They would just pay for the life of his youngest brother. What of his other two brothers, and his father? He must take payment in blood for those also.

He looked at the hills around, and he looked at the camp. This camp was not such as the British camps he had seen from afar in his younger days. Then, each English officer had a fine large tent, with perhaps a smaller one for his servant. More large tents for the soldiers. Tents for officers, for shops, for followers. Tents apparently for nothing at all. Now, it was all different. But few tents, and those small. No tents for servants, none for followers—barely any followers

in fact—and the soldiers made for themselves tents of their blankets. Small tents for the officers, and two officers in each tent. The English were altering their ways. Perhaps the great war in Europe had taught them that war was not a holiday excursion, but a business. The English had fought well in the old day ; now—!

It was not a large expedition. The Tribes on this part of the Border had remained quiet ; for the Afridis, the greatest and most powerful tribe, bided their time ; as did the Amir of Kabul. There was much news, news strange and conflicting. Daily they heard of nations that had joined in the great war ; but on which side they had joined, whether with the English or against them, it was hard to say. Some said one thing, some another. Some said England was fighting alone against the world, some said England had more friends than enemies. Fighting was good, but all men liked to be on the winning side. They would wait. Evidently the English were not yet beaten, for they had still many troops guarding the Frontier. When these troops were withdrawn, then would men know the truth ; then would the Afridis arise in their might and sweep down over Hindustan. But now it were wiser to wait.

But other tribes were not so cautious, the Mohmands, the Waziris, and had paid for their haste. Also even among the tribes that wished to wait were men who grew impatient. Among the Zakka Khel, though they were a branch of the Afridis, were many who murmured and would have had the tribe throw in their lot with the Mohmands. Word of this had been sent to the

English by well-wishers ; and it was to show these murmurers that the English were still strong, that they feared none of the tribes, that the expedition had been sent in the Zakka Khel country.

It was a small expedition, only a few battalions, and they fought not nor entered into any of the villages ; but they sent word that they would come, and they came. They sent word that they wished not war with the Tribes, but that as men said there were no English left in Hindustan, they would show the Zakka Khel that there were not only enough English left to guard Hindustan, there were even men to spare—men who could be sent to the land of the Tribes. They came in peace, but they gave fair warning that they would destroy any village that fired upon them. Then the doubters believed, and the Zakka Khel fought not with the English ; but brought them provisions and food so that the tribe was the richer instead of the poorer by this visit of the English.

Colonel Markham was with the expedition, and thus it was that Asaf Khan was there. The order came three days after that awful day when Asaf Khan rode through the air on the back of a jinn ; and Asaf Khan begged to be allowed to accompany his friend. He would not tell his real reason, that Kai was not far from the country of the Zakka Khel, and that he hoped to find or make an opportunity to visit Kai ; still less would he tell the reason why he would make that visit. He said that in Hindustan he had but one friend, and he would that he might remain with that friend.

When the Colonel pointed out that he was not on the strength, he offered to go as the Colonel's orderly.

But then he must first enlist, the Colonel said, and this Asaf Khan would not do. Were he to enlist, he must swear to be faithful to his salt ; and should anything happen to the Colonel, he would be sent to one of the regiments. Now this Asaf Khan would not have. He was willing to serve the English faithfully, but fight for them against the men of the Border, he would not. His own personal affair was another matter. He could fight his enemies, because they were his enemies ; but he would fight no man of the Border, not even his enemies, at the bidding and on behalf of the English. And so he would not enlist. But then how should he go ?

He would be a bhisti, a water-carrier. He would then be enlisted, but as a non-combatant, and would not have to fight.

At first Colonel Markham thought he jested, for a bhisti is a man of poor estate, and of little consideration in the eyes of men ; and the idea of Asaf-Khan the Warrior, Asaf Khan the Famed, carrying a mashak (waterskin) and supplying the men with water, appeared ludicrous. But Asaf Khan persisted, and in the end with a shrug of his shoulders the Colonel agreed. It would not be for long, he was certain. The English soldier is not very polite, and it would not be long before Asaf Khan threw down his mashak in a rage and demanded to be released.

But in this he was mistaken. Asaf Khan had a purpose, a purpose dear to his heart, and it would be no trifle that would turn him from that purpose. The blood of his father and of his two brothers called out for payment, and the payment must be exacted

else with what face would he meet them in Paradise ? For the first few days his curses were many and deep ; but one day a soldier abused him and threatened to beat him for being late with the water.

Now this boy was a mere youth, a boy of nineteen or thereabouts. He was one of the many who at the beginning of the war overstated their age, and he was not more than sixteen when he was sent out to India. And as he looked at this youth, Asaf Khan was of a sudden filled with admiration for one who, thus young, was yet a seasoned warrior fighting his country's battles in a far land. Also he knew these were not ordinary soldiers. They were men who had given up all and had left their homes to serve their country in her need. They were men after his own heart, true warriors ; and after that he no more cursed when they were angry with him—but sometimes he smiled grimly at Asaf Khan the water-carrier.

And as Asaf Khan sat outside the tent and thought, a man passed by. Now Asaf Khan had noticed this man before, and had noticed also that he looked curiously at all things as he passed. And his face was familiar, though Asaf Khan could not put a name to it. The man, from his uniform, was a mule driver ; but Asaf Khan knew him as a man of the Border also, and a man of the Border who walks about an English camp with curious eyes, will bear watching. Asaf Khan rose and followed the man.

Now Asaf Khan wore his turban low, with the end passed across his mouth. It is the custom of many when on the march, for so the dust does not enter in their throats ; but Asaf Khan wore his turban thus

always. This he did for two reasons ; that none should now know in the water-carrier, Asaf Khan the Warrior ; and that in the days to come none should know in Asaf Khan the Warrior, the bhisti of the expedition. And so he always wore his turban low, with the end across his mouth.

Because he wore his turban thus, he could approach closely the man he followed ; and it was not long ere he knew him for who he was. He was of Kai, Asaf Khan knew his name and family ; but what did he in the English camp ? Why walked he with curious eyes ? It was still early, later would he return and watch this man. Each night would he do so ; for this was not only an enemy of the English, this was his own enemy, a man of Kai and all men of Kai were his enemies. He returned to the Colonel's tent.

Now in the Colonel's tent was a gun the like of which Asaf Khan had seen only once before, and then for but a short time ; and at this gun Asaf Khan loved to look. It was much bigger and heavier than an ordinary rifle, but yet not too heavy for a strong man to carry on his shoulder ; and it seemed that the cartridges were not put in separately, not even in clips, for the cartridges were in a band even as were the cartridges of the small rifle cannon (machine guns) with which Asaf Khan was now familiar.

It was a Lewis gun. There are but few in India, for they are not of much use in Border warfare, where men must climb hills and travel light ; but the Colonel had got one up, for he wished to study the mechanism with a view to possible improvement. He approached as

Asaf Khan gazed at the gun, and with a smile explained the working of it.

“Art not afraid of rifle thieves?” asked Asaf Khan.

The Colonel smiled. Asaf Khan had told him of the rifles of Ambala. “Would’st again adventure? Was the gain so great last time?”

Asaf Khan stroked his beard and shook his head. “Of a truth, that once will suffice for a lifetime!”

“Then I fear no other,” laughed the Colonel.

Asaf Khan smiled in return; but as he walked away his head sank, and he walked in deep thought.

* * * * *

The soft thud of the mule’s hoofs on the turf by the road was the only sound that broke the stillness, and the man ceased to glance back. He was safe from pursuit; and if he could only get over yonder high range by morning, he would win through. He was confident he would succeed; for the mule would carry him far ere dawn broke, and before reaching the foot of the range he would dismount, and would slip through the cordon of pickets on foot.

Great would be his fame in Kai. Alone he had been into the camp of the English, and now he returned with news of their numbers and arms. . . Not exactly good news; for this which the English called a small expedition consisted of as many men as any one of the smaller tribes could muster, even if they were to call out every man of the tribe. Still, he had done what many dared not do, and great would be his fame.

Would his fame ever rival the fame of Asaf Khan?

What had become of Asaf Khan ? News of him had come to Kai once or twice, but for many days none had heard of him. Perchance he was dead. Would to Allah he were ! For now every man in Kai was his enemy, and from each would he demand the blood of his father and his brothers. True, he himself had killed many men in the great fight at the Defence of the House, but all knew Asaf Khan. Little would he reckon those he killed that day ; he would want more blood in payment, the blood of every man in Kai. But Asaf Khan was dead. If not dead he was far away, so why trouble about—he pitched forward on his head, felled by a shrewd blow delivered from an overhanging branch.

Before he could rise, Asaf Khan was upon him and began to twist his arm behind him. Not a playful twist, but the twist that dislocates the shoulder—that wrenches the arm from its socket.

The man screamed in agony ; but Asaf Khan kept the pressure till he felt the limb give and knew that it was dislocated. The man fainted, but in a few moments he revived, to find himself helpless with a dislocated shoulder, and—Asaf Khan seated beside him. He tried to rise, but Asaf Khan pulled him down.

“ Nay, brother,” he said softly, “ are we not friends ? Are we not both from the same village, the village of Kai ? Let us then sit and pass a few minutes in friendly converse. I saw thee in the English camp, and such is my love for the men of Kai that I followed thee in order to learn from thee how fares it with the others. What didst thou in the English camp ? ”

The man began an evasive reply ; but Asaf Khan jerked the damaged arm, wringing a shriek from the poor wretch

“ Speak the truth,” he said, “ or I will even dislocate thy other shoulder. I know much ”—he really knew nothing—“ and if thy words are false, I shall know.”

How can a man fight against fate ? The man told all. There was a German in Kai, a German who came with great tales of victory over the English. The Indian troops who went against the Turks were all destroyed. Nothing was left to England, but India ; and if the Tribes would only rise, even India would be lost to the English. India would be the spoil of those who had the courage to take it.

But the Tribes had heard these tales before, and would make sure of their truth. Even now English troops were in the country of the Zakka Khel, and how could this be if the words of the German were true words ? Still, it was a dazzling prospect ; and this man was a white man, even as the English were. The word of a white man was to be trusted. That is. it used to be so ; but men said the Germans, though they had white skins, were not as other white men. It was whispered that they would tell a lie, or make a promise which they could not fulfil—which they had no intention of fulfilling.

And so this man had been sent to learn the strength of the English. When he returned the Tribes would decide whether to follow the advice of the German, or to wait a little longer.

He was due back on Friday ; and after the mid-day prayer there would be a meeting on the flat outside

the village ; when he would give his news, and the German would address the people.

Asaf Khan nodded his head. He knew the man spoke the truth, and wondered if he could turn the matter to his own advantage. For half an hour he sat silent, his busy brain at work, and then, with a satisfied smile, he rose to his feet. There was but one thing he regretted ; he must not slay the man, he must take him to the camp. He looked longingly at the man's neck—how easy it would be to break ! And when his hand brushed against the handle of his knife, he could hardly forbear to draw it.

Tying the mule to a tree well back from the road, Asaf Khan drove the man before him to the camp. They were nearly shot by a nervous sentry, that is, the man was nearly shot—Asaf Khan kept behind him—and the report roused the camp. But it was soon known to be a false alarm and, grumbling, the soldiers went to sleep again.

Asaf Khan and his prisoner were taken to Colonel Markham's tent, for Asaf Khan claimed to be working under the orders of the Colonel, and there the spy repeated his tale. He was in great agony, and as soon as he had finished, he was sent to the field hospital to be attended to. As nothing further could be done that night, Asaf Khan was dismissed with the assurance that his services of the night would not be forgotten, and the camp was soon quiet.

Next day Asaf Khan was missing. So was the mule. So was the Lewis gun together with a quantity of ammunition. But Asaf Khan's water-skin remained.

* * * * *

Asaf Khan lay hid in a clump of bushes at the edge of the flat, waiting for the people to assemble. He had arrived the previous night, and taking shelter in a copse, the copse in which he had avenged his honour on the son of Hafiz Ali, he waited till the call of the Mullah summoned the Faithful to the Friday mid-day prayer.

Spreading his carpet in an open space, Asaf Khan hastily repeated the prayers for the day. He knew he had ample time, for the prayers this day would be longer than usual. It was no light matter the people were about to discuss, and at the conclusion of the usual prayers, the Mullah would certainly repeat some special ones. If he were inclined to favour the rising, he would repeat the promises made to those of the Faithful who should slay the infidel ; and that would take long.

His prayers finished, Asaf Khan removed the Lewis gun and ammunition from the mule, and made his way cautiously to that edge of the flat furthest removed from the village. He had little fear of being seen. This was no ordinary day. Every man of Kai would be at the masjid (mosque), even the women would be there, standing afar. The children too, except those who had driven cattle to the higher mountains, would out of curiosity be at the masjid. Still, it is as well to be careful.

Choosing a suitable spot he lay down ; and training his gun on a mound, which from the fresh appearance of the earth had evidently been hastily thrown up to provide a platform for the speakers at the day's doings, he waited the coming of the people.

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He had not long to wait. The gate of the village opened, and a number of children scampered out. They clustered about the gate on either hand, and presently the elders came forth. The mullah led them, and by him walked one who from his dress was a stranger. This must be the German, and Asaf Khan wondered how he would behave when the killing began.

After the elders, came the men of the village, a great number, for every man was there. No women came ; for this was man's work, and in man's work a woman has no place. Hers is to mind the children, and to cook the food so that the man can work well.

Chanting, the Mullah led the way, and reaching the platform of earth, ascended it. Only the German accompanied him on the platform, for now that they were close, not more than a hundred yards away, Asaf Khan could see that this was a white man. The elders grouped themselves below, and around stood the people. Sometimes looks were turned to the path that led from the village to the valley, for the messenger from the camp of the English, but none looked in the direction in which Asaf Khan lay hid.

The German was the first to speak. He spoke in excellent Pusto, and at the sound of his voice Asaf Khan started, for he knew the man. Before the war, this man had been the cause of much murmuring in Peshawar. All the bazaar had spoken of it. Coming there, he had opened a shop ; but not doing well, he had appealed for help to the English. He was a white man even as they were, and they should help a white man. Moreover he had children ; and their hearts

moved to pity, many of the English had given him their custom. They had helped him, buying dear from him when they could have bought cheap from others, so that he and his children should not want—and this was his gratitude ! Asaf Khan spat on the ground, and wished the German's face were closer. A month before the war the German left Peshawar with his family, now he was here. A pity his family also was not here.

The German spoke well. His words were persuasive and full of guile ; but the people to whom he spoke had their own share of guile and would not be easily deceived. Still, his words had great effect, especially among the young and hot-blooded ; but the elders hesitated. Again he spoke, and now he persuaded more.

“ What would you ? ” he cried. “ The English are weak. Their armies are defeated by the men of my great Emperor, than whom is no greater emperor ! Their armies in Iran are utterly destroyed by the Turks. Everywhere are they defeated, only in Hindustan is there none to stand against them. Arise, then, in your might, ye people of the Border ! Ye descendants of the mighty heroes who of old were the conquerors of Hindustan ! Pour down upon them in your strength ; for they are weak and will flee before ye ! Great will be your reward ; for the spoil of Hindustan will be yours, and the land yours to possess ! Would ye serve the Faith ? Go, then, and slay the infidel ! Would ye serve your pockets ? Go, then, to a land yellow with gold, where be many a man with more gold in his chests than ye have in the whole

Border ! Drive these English from Hindustan ; then shall ye rest in fair gardens by running waters while the maidens of Hindustan, soft and clinging, and beautiful as the houris of Paradise, minister to your wants ! ”

This speech produced a decided impression ; but before any could reply, a voice rang out across the flat. It was Asaf Khan, who, placing his mouth close to the ground so that the sound should be dispersed and none know the direction from which it came, called to the people of Kai.

“ Ay, go and fight the English, ye men of Kai, ye brave warriors who fear a single man ! Hide, rather, in your village ; for know that Asaf Khan lives ! Even in your village ye shall not be safe from his vengeance ! Asaf Khan has said he will return, and return he will ! ’

Now was great confusion among the people. Each asked the other whence the voice came, but none could say. Was it a spirit ? Was it the spirit of Kadir Shah, the father of Asaf Khan, warning them of what was to come ? The German believed not in spirits, and urged them to search. It was good, and each urged the other to search, though none would himself leave the crowd. In the midst of the confusion, Asaf Khan’s voice was again heard.

“ Lo ! How they huddle together like sheep when the wolf is near ! Ye do well to tremble, for many shall not live to see another sun ! I, Asaf Khan, say it ! ”

This time he raised his head and shouted across to them, so that they should both see and hear him ; and it happened as he wished.

This was no spirit. This was a man, the man Asaf Khan ; and though he was a great warrior, he was one and they were many. Closing up, they made a rush in his direction. He might kill one or two ; but the distance was not great, and he could not fire more than two or three times ere they reached him. Then they would slay him, and the village would have no more to fear from this deadly enemy. He would have a knife, but what would one knife avail against hundreds ?

Asaf Khan lay still, a pleased smile playing about his lips ; and when they came within fifty yards of where he lay, he opened fire with the Lewis gun.

The leading men went down like rice when the sickle is laid to its roots. In dismay they recoiled. What devil's weapon was that Asaf Khan possessed, that slew men in such numbers ? Or were others hiding near, whom they could not see ? Still they fell, and in terror the crowd turned to flee. The dreadful blast of death pursued them, mowing them down in swaths, till they scattered, and running to the edge of the flat, plunged in mad terror down the steep hillside.

Asaf Khan ceased firing, and patted his gun. It was a glorious weapon, and had served him well this day. But all was not yet done ; he would more. Hurrying towards the edge of the flat nearest the village he again opened fire. The gate was open, and the bullets sang merrily down the village street. He fired more slowly now, for he would not use up all his ammunition ; but the firing did its work. Soon at the further end of the village was a great clamour, and presently fleeing figures, men, women and children,

dotting the hillside, told him that the village was deserted.

Asaf Khan knew the village well—was it not his own?—and it could not have changed much since he was last there. Entering, he made his way to the richer houses, and there, as none had expected this thing and none had therefore hidden their riches, he found much booty. Only jewels he took, wrenching them from their settings, and returned to the gate laden with wealth. He had avenged his father and brothers—and alone he had raided the powerful village of Kai!

But what moved on the flat? The German! He had forgotten this man. The German had fallen early, and thinking him dead, Asaf Khan had not borne him in mind. But the German was not dead, for now, lo! he crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the flat. A few shots Asaf Kahn sent in his direction, and the German fell flat. Asaf Khan strode across and stood over the man.

The German was not dead, not even wounded; and now, knowing himself discovered, he clasped Asaf Khan by the knees.

“Slay me not! Slay me not, brave warrior!” he babbled in terror. “Give me but a moment of speech, and I will tell thee what I would have done with these men, thy enemies and mine!”

These were strange words, and nodding his head, Asaf Khan curtly bade the other speak.

“Know, O illustrious warrior,” stuttered the German—Asaf Khan looked down at this strange specimen of a white man in surprised contempt—“that it was to tempt these men to their ruin and

death I came. Thou art a friend of the white men " —his eyes had fallen on Asaf Khan's military boots— " and I also am a white man. I came to tempt these men, so that they should attack the English and be utterly destroyed ; for who can fight against the English, the most powerful race on earth ! "

Asaf Khan stooped and spat in the man's face.

" Come," he said, dragging the German to his feet. " Come where there be others to whom thou can'st tell this tale."

* * * * *

Two days later, Asaf Khan arrived at the camp. He brought with him the Lewis gun, the mule, and the German. Because he came openly by daylight, none stopped him ; and he made his way to the Orderly Tent of his regiment. Colonel Markham sat at a table outside the tent, and before him Asaf Khan placed the Lewis gun. The German he left as he was, lying across the mule.

" Behold the gun that was stolen the other night," said Asaf Khan. " I followed the thief for two days, and at last overpowered him while he slept. All the ammunition I have not brought, for he had lost some. This German I found in a village tempting the people ; and because they were angered with him for the words he spake, they gave him to me to bring to thee. There will be no more trouble on the Border, for these men were of the Afridis."

The Colonel pulled at his moustache. He knew Asaf Khan was not speaking the truth, that Asaf Khan

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knew a great deal more than he chose to tell of the disappearance of the gun. But Asaf Khan was faithful to his salt, of that he was sure, and the gun was back. Also in some way Asaf Khan had captured this vile German spy, and for this he deserved the thanks of all good men.

"It is well," he said, and he grasped Asaf Khan warmly by the hand. "For this receive my thanks and also word of that which thou hast done will be sent to the great Commander-in-Chief, who will himself thank thee for this day's work. But of this German, is he dead?"

"Of fear perchance," and Asaf Khan smiled grimly, "but he still breathes."

Colonel Markham learned a little from the German while the man lay in the field hospital, and he made a shrewd guess at most of the rest; but never would the German speak of the journey from Kai to the English camp. Always a look of great fear came into his eyes, and he shuddered. What passed in those two days is known only to himself, to Asaf Khan, and to God.

CHAPTER IX

HOW ASAF KHAN BECAME A HOLY PIR

ONCE, for a space, was Asaf Khan a Holy Pir, revered of all men ; and how this strange thing came to pass shall now be told.

It was before the time of the great trouble, when the nations of Europe fought to the death, and the minds of all men turned to war. Free then were the men of the Border to enter Hindustan, and it chanced that in idle mood Asaf Khan turned his steps thither. To the Swat valley had he gone to see a man ; but the man was on a journey, and twenty days would pass ere he returned.

Now, the men of Swat are the cowards of the Border ; and to dwell among cowards for full twenty days or more was not to Asaf Khan's liking. He would cross the Indus ; and in the city of Hazro would he take up his abode till such time as the man should return to his home. At Hazro he would see the wares of Hindustan, and it might be purchase some if he saw aught that he liked.

To the ferry at Khabbal therefore went Asaf Khan,

and crossed the Indus ; but ere he reached Hazro that befell him which he had neither looked for nor wished.

Four miles on the hither side of Hazro lies a village. Without the villages is a graveyard, and near the graveyard is a grove of farash trees, their silvery blue needles drooping softly. Beneath the shade of the farash, almost hidden by the boughs, is a small hut, so small that it might well escape the eye that looked not for it ; and to this hut came Asaf Khan one day with dragging step.

Fever had him in its grip, the fever so well known to those who dwell in the Swat valley ; and to one who is never ill this fever is a thing accursed. Never had Asaf Khan felt as he felt this day ; and with every step he cursed Swat and the day that took him to that vile country.

But cursing speeds no man ; nor will it cure fever. Hazro was still five miles away, his feet were leaden weights, his head swam, and the fires of hell were in his blood. He turned aside to the village, and coming first to the hut, accosted one who sat without.

Hardly could Asaf Khan see the man through the fever mist that blinded his eyes ; but he made out that the man was old, and the look in his eyes was the look of a good man. Asaf Khan threw himself down at the foot of a tree.

“I thirst,” he muttered hoarsely through his parched lips. “Give me to drink.”

In haste the aged man brought cool, sweet water which he held to Asaf Khan’s lips ; and when he had drunk thereof, brought for him a *khat* (string

bedstead). There he laid Asaf Khan, taking him presently within the hut, and for many days tended him till the fever was gone and Asaf Khan well.

Full seven days did Asaf Khan lie upon the bedstead within the hut, and had not his frame been of the strongest, he would surely have died. Not of the fever would he have died. The fever was naught, and had the old man not tended him, in three days would he have been well, for thus long and no longer does this fever last. But this old man was a lover of mankind, always seeking to do what lay in his power to help and befriend others; and therefore had he spent many years in the study of Yunani medicines. Before he came to this place he had been a Hakim (Mahomedan doctor) famed far and wide for the wisdom he had in the art of healing. Many remedies had he for fever; and such was the goodness of his heart that to this poor man, who came to him friendless and ill and from whom he looked for no reward, he gave all these remedies; not one or two, but all. Therefore was Asaf Khan ill for a week and was like to have died. On the seventh day Asaf Khan refused to take any more medicine, and in two days was he well.

But now to Asaf Khan's mind came a new thought. In Hazro he would not dwell; with this old man would he dwell till the time came when he must return. Hazro lay but four miles across the plain, he could go and see if there was aught he cared to purchase. But with the old man would he dwell; for man such as this man had Asaf Khan never seen before, and he would see more of him.

Simple as a child was this holy man. For holy he was, learned in the Koran and all the Holy books. Not as the Mullahs taught was his teaching ; always he spoke as if all men were good. Evil was but the sickness of a good man's mind ; cure this sickness, and the man would again be good. Little had he of wealth, and cared less ; the offerings brought by the people of the village were sufficient for his need. But one day he received a letter.

That day was his face sad, and in the evening he spoke to Asaf Khan. The letter was from his son ; and because he could not do as his son wished, his heart was sad.

This son was in Rawalpindi. He had studied the wisdom of the English in their schools ; now he would learn their medicines and be a great doctor. But much money would be needed for this, and of money the old Pir had none. All he had was spent on the learning of his son, and nothing had he left.

Then was Asaf Khan wroth with the good old man.

“ Much is due from father to son,” he said ; “ but that a father should spend the savings of a lifetime on his son is foolishness ! ”

“ Nay,” corrected the old man mildly. “ Not the savings of a lifetime, for I had saved enough to educate three sons. But now I have it not.”

Though Asaf Khan pressed him, for long would the old Pir not say what had become of this money ; but when Asaf Khan threatened to leave him and go to live in Hazro, and no longer dwell in the house of one who put so little trust in a friend, the old man told his tale.

Much money had he when he decided to give up the world and spend the remainder of his days in devotion and prayer. Coming to this place, he had built him a hut and hidden the money under the floor.

But in this world there be men who revere not the things that are most holy. Little would these men reckon that the money was that of a Pir; and should they by chance find out where his wealth was hid, they would take it. Not for itself did he value this wealth, nor for his own sake; but with it he could give his son all the learning he wished, and have something over to help the young man when he should begin in life.

Fearing therefore for his money, he cast about in his mind for a way to preserve it from the hands of evil men; and at last he thought of the village banniah (grocer and moneylender). This man had money and knew how to keep it safely; to the banniah would he make over the care of his money, and take it when he had need. And so, keeping by him a fair sum, he gave the rest to the banniah. With joy the banniah took the money, giving a receipt for it, and with his mind at peace the old Pir returned to his hut.

But the heart of the banniah was wicked, and his thoughts were evil. A week after he got the money he came to the Pir's hut, and in much contrition confessed to the holy man that he had been tempted, and had done evil. The receipt was no receipt, for it was not stamped. This he had done, intending to keep the money for himself; but now

his heart smote him, and he would undo the wrong he had done. He would take away the receipt, and bring one stamped even according to the law.

But he came not with the new receipt ; and when a fortnight was passed, the Pir went to his house. Then was the banniah filled with grief ; no stamps were there in the village, and he had not had time to go to Hazro. When he went to that city, he would bring a stamp and give the receipt in proper form. A month passed, and still there was no receipt. There were no stamps in Hazro, said the banniah ; when he went to Campbellpore he would bring a stamp.

And then he wept. Did the Pir Sahib think him a thief ? When he repented him of his evil, had he not come at once and told the truth ? Did the Pir Sahib think he would not return the money ? And again he wept. With kind words did the Pir comfort him, and no more did he press the banniah for a receipt, though five years had passed since that day.

But three months ago he had gone to the banniah, for he needed money to send to his son. The banniah was amazed. What money ? he asked ; and when the Pir said the banniah had money belonging to him, the Pir, the banniah lifted up his voice and wept. In his old age he was called a thief ! He called all his gods to witness that he had received no money from the Pir, nor owed him anything.

Many of the people of the village came to learn the meaning of the noise ; and to them the banniah related how this Pir whom men thought so holy.

was calling him a thief and with threats would force money from him.

Then was the old Pir ashamed for this man ; and returning to his hut, sat him down with a sigh. He had no receipt to show ; unless the banniah recovered from this evil sickness, the money was gone.

Asaf Khan listened in grim silence to the tale. Naught did he say, neither words of pity for the Pir, nor words of blame for the banniah. It was the way of the world, he said, and many men suffered from the sickness with which the banniah was afflicted. But that evening he sat apart and thought deeply how the banniah might be cured of his illness.

And after those who had come to learn of the holy Pir of the farash grove had departed, Asaf Khan told that to the Pir which filled the worthy man with wonder.

He, Asaf Khan, had deceived the Pir Sahib. He was a learned man. Not in the Koran and the Holy Books was he learned ; but from a pious ascetic in Turkestan had he learnt much of the wisdom of healing, not by medicines, but by spells. This illness which afflicted the banniah was not of the body ; it was of the mind, and by spells only could it be cured.

But to perform these spells, Asaf Khan must be alone. In Hazro must the Pir Sahib dwell for a space ; or he could go see his son in Rawalpindi ; but he must not return till Asaf Khan gave the word. And before going he must tell all men who Asaf Khan really was, saying that Asaf Khan would remain in his place for a time.

Though the Pir Sahib himself dealt not in spells, fearing that in them lay evil, when Asaf Khan pointed out that the Holy Prophet Sulieman himself dealt in spells and commanded the spirits of the four elements, he consented. Next day he told all men that Asaf Khan was a holy and learned man, who would be their friend and guide while he went to see his son in Rawalpindi ; and the following morning he left.

For three days did Asaf Khan sit before the hut under the farash trees talking to those who came to learn of him ; but on the fourth day he went to the village, for he would see this banniah he was about to cure.

The banniah sat in his shop, his small son by his side, and his eyes narrowed and grew furtive when he saw Asaf Khan coming up the village street. All strangers to the village he welcomed, for they meant more custom ; but in this stranger he saw one who might prove a foe. This man had dwelt with the Pir, and the old Pir may have spoken of the money and the receipt. But the man could do naught. This was not the Border, this was British ground. If this man used threats, the police were the good friends of the banniah, to whom they owed much money, and they would soon send this Pathan packing whence he came. If he came at night, the doors and windows were strong, of thick wood strengthened with iron. More than one had tried to enter the banniah's house at night and had failed.

But the new Pir's look was mild, and in his voice was no anger. The old Pir had said naught of the

money, and the banniah's heart was at ease. Awhile they talked, Asaf Khan asking the price of the various commodities in the banniah's shop, the ghee, the dal (pulse), the ata, and the oil ; and then Asaf Khan asked if any other Hindus resided in the village.

Now, this question gave the banniah food for much thought ; and after he had replied that he was the only Hindu, and the Pir had gone his way, the banniah pondered long on this matter. Pirs are Mussulmans, and show little interest in Hindus ; what meant this question ?

Two days passed ; and then men began to talk of a strange thing. Many years ago, in the days when the Sikhs ruled the land, a banniah dwelt in this village. Rich was he ; and as in those days there were no banks, he hid his money in the ground, but where, no man save himself knew. The Sikh Raj passed away, the Mussulmans again ruled the land, and one night the banniah was slain for his wealth. But though the whole of his house and courtyard was dug up to a depth of many feet, no money was found.

Strange as the tale was, stranger was it that no man of the village had heard this tale before. In the time of their grandfathers had the Sikh rule come to an end, and in their time must the banniah have been slain ; yet no man's father had talked of the banniah and his lost wealth. But when men hear of gold or hidden treasure, greed clouds their minds, and the wisest are but fools.

Thus was it in the village. None asked whence came the tale, none questioned its truth ; all were

filled with the longing to find this hidden treasure. None worked. The bullocks grazed idle in the pastures with none to yoke them to the plough, for all men searched in and about the village for the treasure that would make the finder rich for life.

For six days men searched ; but on the seventh day sense returned to them, and they took up again the work they had laid aside. Again were the tails of the bullocks twisted to urge them forward ; again did the Eastern plough scratch the surface of the ground. And now men spoke of a new thing

The banniah heard the tale, and he, too, was seized with the wish to possess this treasure ; for however much a man may have, he will always want more. Nay, often it is that the more a man has the more he wants. But the banniah was a cunning man. While others searched, he stayed at home. What gain would be his if he found the treasure ? Others would know, and would wrest it from him. When the villagers ceased to search, then would he begin. He was a Hindu, and would know better than these men where a Hindu would hide his wealth. And then he heard the new thing of which men spoke.

Men had questioned the new Pir about this treasure, and at first he would say naught ; but one day, when many pressed him, he drew from his pocket a small book and made therein strange lines and circles. And after he had looked upon these lines for a space, he bade the men go home. This was the treasure of a Hindu, and was guarded by the demons they worshipped. By no Mussulman would this treasure be found ; which was good, for it was the money

of greed and extortion and was in the care of demons and spirits of evil. Then did the men of the village give over the search, and return, each man to his labour.

Only to a Hindu would the hiding place of this treasure be divulged by the demons who guarded it, the Pir had said. This news sounded good in the ears of the banniah, for he was the only Hindu in the village; and at nightfall, when none would be with the Pir, the banniah went to the small hut in the farash grove. Now he knew the meaning of the question the Pir asked at their first meeting. The Pir knew of this treasure, and from the beginning had known that only to a Hindu would it be rendered up by those who held it in charge.

The Pir sat without the door of his hut, and with many humble salaams did the banniah approach. In this man's hands lay his fate. If this Pir would but help him, he would be rich. He could give up his shop, and go to his home in Amritsar, there to become a Rai Bahadur, and a Member of the Municipality! Then could he return a hundredfold the scorn of those who before had scorned him.

With trembling hands clasped before him he prayed the Pir Sahib to tell him where this treasure lay hid. The Pir Sahib was a holy man, and to him were revealed all things. And the fame of the Pir Sahib's goodness of heart was known far and wide. Even on vile Hindus he had pity. Would the Holy Pir Sahib take pity on this vile Hindu and tell him where the treasure lay hid? He had heard that only to a Hindu would the hiding place be disclosed.

At first the Pir would not. It was ill work meddling with evil spirits, and he would none of it ; but the banniah pressed him, promising him a quarter, a half, threequarters of the treasure, and at last the Pir consented. But first he would know if the banniah was pure of heart. To such a man, and to such alone would the treasure be given. If the banniah had wronged any man, let him first make reparation.

By all his gods and by Gange Mai (Mother Ganges) did the banniah swear that never had any man suffered wrong at his hands. Again the Pir pressed him, warning him that ill would befall them both if but one little speck of evil rested on his soul ; and again the banniah swore that his soul was pure as the soul of a little child. Then did the Pir bid him come on the following night, when the hiding place of the treasure would be disclosed.

The banniah went his way rejoicing. Much wealth would be his, and he would be a great man in his home in Amritsar. He had promised the Pir a share ; but Pirs know little of the things of this world, it would be a small matter for him to devise a plan whereby to possess himself of the whole.

Naught did the banniah sell that day. Who were these rude villagers that they should demand ghee and dal from him ! He was a great man, a Rai Bahadur ! Let them go to some common banniah for their ghee ! At nightfall he hurried to the farash grove and found the Pir ready.

Five lamps had the Pir, five small earthen lamps in which mustard oil is burned with an open wick, and also he had a small book and a white cock.

First did the Pir trace upon the ground with a stick the magic sign known to the English as the pentacle, at each corner placing one of the lamps he had lighted ; and in the centre he laid the white cock, its legs and wings bound. Then taking the now trembling banniah by the hand, he led him within the inner pentagon and began to mutter words which he read from the small book.

Then was the soul of the banniah filled with fear, and he wished in his heart he had not come. But presently he thought of the treasure, and again was calm.

For a space did the Pir continue to read from the book words the banniah knew not the meaning of, and at the sound of which he trembled. Presently the Pir ceased reading, and seizing the white cock cut its throat, scattering to the four points of the compass the blood which gushed forth. Suddenly he caught the banniah by the arm.

“ Down ! ” he said harshly. “ That comes, to look on which is to die ! Down ! and hide thine eyes lest the sight strike thee dead ! ”

With a stifled wail of terror the banniah collapsed in a huddled heap at the Pir's feet, muffling his head in his lohi (mantle). Not only did he wish to see naught, he wished not even to hear ; and he placed his hands over his ears.

What dread spirits appeared to the Holy Pir, he knew not, nor did he hear aught. Pressed to the earth he cowered till the Pir Sahib touched him on the shoulder and bade him rise.

“ It is finished,” said the Pir in a hollow voice.

“ The demons have spoken ; and yonder the treasure lies hid. But once again I ask. Is thy soul indeed pure of wrong done to any man ? ”

The banniah's fear was gone, driven from his heart by greed. In a few moments the treasure would be his ! Trembling with eagerness, he begged the Pir to lead him to the place, repeating again and again that he had wronged no man in his life. Interest he had charged ; but fair interest, and always had he been a lenient creditor.

Then did the Pir lead the banniah round the wall of the graveyard ; and coming to a place where the moonlight shone not and all was dark, he stood so that the two largest farash trees were in line.

“ If the demon spoke truly, this should be the spot,” he muttered ; and drew a second pentacle upon the ground. “ Dig here, O man of a pure heart,” he said to the banniah. “ With thy right hand shalt thou dig, for thus hath the demon willed. No tool shalt thou use ; but thou shalt find the ground soft to thy hand, for the demon shall help thee.”

Then did the banniah place his trembling hand upon the ground, and lo ! it was soft. The treasure was his ! Feverishly he dug until his fingers smarted and were sore. But not for sore fingers would he cease, nor even pause. Now the ground was even softer, and in his eagerness he plunged his hand deep into the soft earth.

With a wild cry the banniah sank prostrate to the ground. Something within the earth had caught his hand, and now held it fast ! Something had seized his hand with a grip of iron, some demon

doubtless, and he was a dead man ! Recovering from the first paralysing fear, he strove to withdraw his hand. Like a madman he strove ; but strive as he might, his hand came not forth from the ground.

In great alarm the Pir bent over him, asking him the cause of his disorder.

“ The Devil has me by the hand ! ” wailed the unhappy banniah. “ I am a dead man ! What devil tempted me to this quest ! Only free my hand, most reverend Pir Sahib, and all the treasure shall be thine ; not a pice of this accursed money do I want ! ”

The Pir shook his head gravely.

“ Thou hast lied,” he said severely. “ Someone hast thou wronged, and therefore has this come to pass. Thy soul is not pure, therefore has this evil come upon thee. Yet again will I consult the demons and learn their will.”

For a time the Pir pored over his book, muttering to himself ; and presently he walked to a place apart. Sinking to his knees, he placed his ear to the ground and appeared to listen.

The banniah watched him with starting eyes. It was true ; he had told a lie. He had wronged a man ; for he had wronged the old Pir. The demons knew it, and they would not release him till he had undone that wrong. Alas ! To give up that money would indeed break his heart. Again he struggled to release his hand, but in vain.

The Pir rose from the ground, and coming to the banniah, stood over him.

“ Thou hast wronged a man,” he said accusingly. “ The demons have told me ; and they have also told

me the name of the man thou hast wronged. It is the old Pir who once dwelt in the hut where I now live."

Who can strive against fate ; and who can fight against demons ? With many sighs the banniah confessed his fault and promised restitution. But if he thought promises would avail, his disappointment was great, for still his hand was held fast.

The Pir Sahib stroked his beard. How much was this money ? he asked ; and when he was told the sum, he nodded. The banniah spoke the truth now, for it was even the sum the old Pir had mentioned. This money must be made good, said the Pir Sahib ; not afterwards, but now ; else would not the demons release their hold.

Then was the banniah sore afflicted. Almost rather would he part with his hand than with his money. But would the demons rest content with his hand ? If he did not as they commanded, they might drag him bodily to regions below ! In haste he promised to do as the Pir Sahib might think fit.

Then did the Pir Sahib bring paper and pen to the banniah, and bade him write to his son to give to the Pir Sahib a sum of money and also a receipt he would find in a certain drawer.

The sum the Pir named was twice the amount the banniah owed the old Pir, and at first he refused to write. Why twice the amount ? he quavered. A fair rate of interest he was willing to give ; but twice the amount ! Cent per cent ! But when the Pir Sahib threatened to leave him to the demons, he gave way. About the receipt, for long he would not

write. There was no receipt. There never had been a receipt. But in the end he wrote this also ; and with the writing in his hand the Pir Sahib left the place, bidding the banniah be of good cheer. As soon as he received the money the banniah's hand would be released, and he could then dig up the treasure and be richer a hundred times than he had been before.

This thought comforted the banniah, and he lay patiently waiting the moment when he would be free to take that for which he had dared so much. But time passed, and still was his hand fast in the grip of the demon. Nor did the Pir Sahib return. An hour passed thus, two hours, and then the banniah began to wonder if all the wrongs he had done in the past must be undone ere he was released. Then was he indeed lost ! It would take two lifetimes to undo the wrong he had done in one, and never would he be released from the grip of the demon.

But when the third hour passed, and still the Pir Sahib came not, another thought came to the banniah. Pushing into the earth his left hand, which he had not dared before lest it be seized also, he felt down to his right wrist.

This the grasp of a demon ! Alas ! Alas ! The demon that grasped his hand was a contrivance of wood and string !

The grove resounded with his cries of despair ; but none came to his aid—all within the village were asleep. One indeed heard, one who dwelt on the outskirts of the village ; but shuddering he pulled the bedclothes over his head and closed his ears. It

was a ghou! who howled at night in the graveyard, and he repeated the Kalma (creed) till he fell asleep.

Desperately the banniah sought to free himself. Who knew what that devil of a Pir was doing in his house! A Pir! He would Pir him when he got loose! He strove again to release his hand, but the spring that held the wood together was too strong.

And so the banniah lay till the dawn broke, now cursing his stupidity in listening to the Pir, now cursing this cunning Pir who had got the better of a banniah.

In the morning some, hearing his cries, came and released him. They had to dig up the trap by which he was held, and lo! the spirit was of wood and string with a spring cunningly hid within.

"This is a trap wherewith jackals are caught on the Border," quoth one of the men. "This time it has caught a banniah!" and he laughed loudly. "A mistake even a man might make!"

In haste did the banniah hurry home, only to find that it was even as he had feared. The Pir had brought the letter; and the boy, seeing his father's writing, had given both the money and the receipt. He raced to the Pir's hut; but it was empty, and the air rang with sounds of woe and grief.

For long did the banniah lie in the farash grove bemoaning the loss of his money, and then he returned to his house. Here he beat his son, his wife, and the maidservant, and felt better. He was minded to beat the manservant also, but the manservant was strong and of a surly temper.

The money was gone. This false Pir was from across the Border, and had doubtless returned whence he came, taking the money with him. But he would have his revenge ! He would get his cousin's wife, who lived in Hazro, to put a charm upon the thief so that his bones should rot and his body burn with a consuming fire. As for the old Pir, who had been the cause of all this woe in that he left in his place this villain, let him but come back !

But the old Pir returned no more to the hut beneath the farash trees. To him came the friend he had left in his place, bringing news that made glad his heart. The banniah was cured of the evil sickness and was another man. In proof of this cure he had sent the Pir his money, and an extra thousand rupees as interest. Also he begged the Pir Sahib to keep the receipt in case the evil sickness came upon him again and he sought to take back the money he now so willingly sent. In return he asked but one favour ; that the Pir Sahib should come no more to that village, else would he, the banniah, be shamed in the sight of all men.

Gladly did the old Pir promise. Who was he that he should put a good man to shame ! He would live with his son in Rawalpindi, and no more return to the hut in the farash grove by the graveyard.

Knowing the banniah would not dare anything against one who held his receipt, and who might, should he go to law, compel him to pay the money over again, Asaf Khan returned to Swat a far richer man than he left it. Also, before leaving Rawalpindi, he told to the son of the old Pir the whole tale.

CHAPTER X

HOW ASAF KHAN WENT TO JELALABAD

ASAF KHAN, Pathan, Afridi, sat without his door in the camel serai of Peshawar City. The evening sun cast slanting rays across the open square as if it sought in wonder the things which should have been there but were not. For the great square lay deserted. The square that, large as it was, had proven in times that were past too small sometimes to hold the vast concourse that sought shelter within its walls, was now desolate and silent. A stray street dog, its bones showing through its filthy skin, grubbed in a corner in a vain search for the food which had once been plentiful but which was no longer there. The ubiquitous sparrow had long since departed to the bazaars where grain might still be picked up, though not as in the days when the loads of rich caravans lay about in the serai, the fat grain bags waiting to be loaded on the camels which would presently take them to hungry lands beyond the Khyber. The sparrow was gone, and now the timid bulbul, plucking up courage, had dared invade this deserted square which he and his wife had seen often as they flew across from garden

to garden, but which they had feared to visit before. Now they came together and hopped about, flirting their tails to show the scarlet under-feathers, the occasional warble of the male sending Asaf Khan in thought back to his own land, to the land of the peach, the walnut, and the pomegranate; where the mountain stream rippled down with musical trill, and the soft call of the wood pigeon alternated with the song of the bulbul swinging free in the mountain air on the blooms of a pomegranate spray.

But only for a time do the thoughts of Asaf Khan wander thus afar. Only for a moment do his thoughts turn to the home he will never see again. A woman comes out of another room and throws a bucket of dirty water into the square. The bulbuls flee in alarm, and Asaf Khan is recalled to the present, to the heat, to the flies and dust, to the empty serai, to the incomprehensibility of all things.

Then his thoughts turn to Russia, that vast land beyond Afghanistan.

And while Asaf Khan ponders on this theme, another, an Englishman, sits in a bungalow on the other side of cantonments, and Asaf Khan is in his thoughts.

This is the Wise One, whose duty it is to know all things on the Border, the man with a thousand eyes and ears, the man from whom none of the secrets of the Border are hid, even he whom the English call the Political Officer. That day had he received a letter from his friend Colonel Markham, who was on special duty in Gilgit away on the borders of Kashmir; and in the letter had the colonel told him where Asaf Khan might be found if he still dwelt in

Peshawar. The Wise One called to him a peon.

And it came to pass, that as Asaf Khan sat thinking, there came to him one clad in gorgeous clothes of scarlet hue. His belt was of gold, and he walked as one who owned the earth and all thereon.

And coming to Asaf Khan, he addressed him without greeting, bidding him come at once, for the Great One called him and would brook no delay.

Then was Asaf Khan wroth. Seizing an earthen pitcher of sour milk he hurled it at the Gorgeous One; so that the pitcher broke and the glory of the scarlet *chapkan* and the gold belt departed in a flood of sour milk.

So also did the Gorgeous One depart, the Gorgeous One who was no longer gorgeous but a thing of Pity and Shame. In fear he fled; and running to the Wise One, related to him all that Asaf Khan had done, showing with many wailings the clothes whose glory was not.

"Sent he no word?" asked the Wise One impatiently.

"Naught replied that son of the Evil One," replied the injured *chuprassi* (peon), "save that as I fled he swore that on the morrow at noon he would follow me here and slay me. Therefore have I just received a telegram to say that the aunt of my wife's cousin is dead, and I crave your honour to grant me leave till this son of the devil is come and gone."

Then did the Wise One know that on the next day would Asaf Khan answer the summons; and comforting the man with a gift, he bade him be at

peace and fear not, for he would see that Asaf Khan did him no harm.

Asaf Khan in the serai, spat after the departing form of the Gorgeous One. But what did the Wise One want with him? He had refused before to have dealings with the Wise One. He was a warrior; not a spy! Why sent the Wise One for him now?

He returned to the thoughts the advent of the Gorgeous One had so rudely disturbed. Strange rumours came from Russia in these days. Russia had ceased to fight, and was no longer at war with the Germans. He had heard that they had killed their king, his wife and his children, and were now fighting among themselves. Now he heard that the men who had done this evil thing were all-powerful in Russia, and imposed their will on all men.

And what of this new faith these men professed? They said all men were equal and that each man should possess an equal share of this world's goods. A babu told him that this was called Bolshevism, and that those who professed this faith were called Bolsheviks.

Asaf Khan could sympathise with these Bolsheviks. Bolshevism appealed to him strongly. It was only fair that all men should share alike; and if Bolshevism came to Peshawar, he also would be a Bolshevik.

In Peshawar were many rich Hindus. Was it right that these Kafirs should have so much wealth while he, a good Mussulman, had barely the wherewithal to live? Decidedly it could not be right. He would be a Bolshevik and make these men share their wealth with him; then, as a punishment for

their selfish greed, he would take the rest from them and give it to good Mussulmans. If they refused to deliver up their wealth, they would prove themselves the enemies of mankind, in that they kept to themselves the wealth that of right belonged to all, and he would cut their throats.

Asaf Khan came to the bungalow of the Wise One at noon next day. He knew the Wise One would understand and would be waiting for him, so he walked to the office door. A Gorgeous One squatted without the door, not the Gorgeous One of the previous day, but another. This one had received his orders, and also he had seen the woeful state in which his friend returned after delivering a message to this ferocious savage. In haste he darted within, announced the Pathan's arrival, and threw up the *chik* (bamboo screen) that Asaf Khan might enter.

Asaf Khan looked at the Wise One curiously. He had seen him from afar, and had heard from him through others, but the two had never met. He had heard that this was a Man; he would now see for himself. For a space the two gazed into each other's eyes in silence, and Asaf Khan was satisfied. This man's look was straight, he would not ask another to do what he would himself scorn to do. His face was mild; but it was not weak; the firm purpose was there that enabled this man to bend other men to his will. And he was calm. He did not rush into speech, neither did he fidget. He was a Man.

"Thy servant came with a message. I am here."

"It is good. Be seated," and the Wise One indicated a chair.

Asaf Khan grunted. So it was something of importance this man wanted from him. Else why the chair. He seated himself.

"Knowest thou whom people mean when they talk of Bolsheviks?"

The question took Asaf Khan completely by surprise. He had expected something relative to the Border, something which he as a man of the Border was likely to know; and lo! he was asked if he knew who the Bolsheviks were! The Englishman awaited an answer. Asaf Khan nodded his head.

"They are folk who believe that all things should be held in common. This is good; and I, also, am a Bolshevik, for this is my belief."

"And thou hast shared thy goods with others?"

Asaf Khan smiled grimly.

"Nay, thou art wise and can'st read the thoughts of men; why ask? I am not one who shares with others; I am of those who make others share with them."

The Wise One smiled in turn.

"Thou art a true Bolshevik, even as those others in Russia. They also are of those who would that others should share with them; and now that there are none left in Russia whose goods they can share, they turn their eyes to other countries. They would come to Hindustan and share in the wealth of this country. But this they will not find easy, and it may be they will never come. Those who wait for wealth till the Bolsheviks come will die poor. There are other and quicker ways of becoming rich."

Asaf Khan rose to his feet.

"We but waste time in unprofitable talk. Asaf Khan is no spy."

"Nay," and the Englishman stayed him with a gesture. "Hear what I would say, and then do as thou wilt. To receive a reward for service performed is no shame ; the shame is in the deed. There is no shame in what I would ask of thee ; it is a service that can be performed only by one who is honest, trustworthy, faithful to his word, and the bravest of men. Such a man cannot be asked to do a shameful thing. Colonel Markham says thou art such a man, and therefore have I sent for thee."

Asaf Khan salaamed ironically.

"Chupattis are swallowed more easily when smeared with ghee (clarified butter)," he said, seating himself again. "What would'st thou of me ? Is it aught to do with the Bolsheviks ? Remember, I also am a Bolshevik."

"Bolsheviks be damned !" exclaimed the other explosively in English. "It is needless to tell me thou art a Bolshevik," he continued more calmly in Pusto. "Every thief on the Border is a Bolshevik, and nine-tenths of the people of Hindustan ; all, in fact, who have less than others. But of this there is no need to speak. As thou knowest well, while the English are in Hindustan there will be no Bolshevism in that country. What a man has honestly earned shall be his and his son's. Men, lazy, and improvident, shall not take from those whose industry and thrift have brought them wealth in money or lands. What hast thou heard of these Bolsheviks other than that they talk thus ? "

Asaf Khan smiled slightly ; the heat of the Englishman amused him.

“What sayest *thou* of these Bolsheviks ? ” he returned.

“They are thieves and robbers ! ” replied the Englishman forcibly. “They are not even lovers of their country ; for it was German gold that first corrupted them and made them hamper their fighting men, so that they could no longer fight, having neither guns nor ammunition, having not even food ! While the brave sons of Russia were at war with the enemies of their country, these traitors betrayed them ! ”

“The English are now at war with the Bolsheviks,” said Asaf Khan dryly.

The Englishman recovered the poise he had in the heat of the moment lost. He smiled.

“And so I speak ill of them ? Nay, thou knowest it is not that, for thou knowest the English. But to return to the Bolsheviks. When these Russian traitors made peace with Germany, they became our enemies, and they now seek to injure us. They have destroyed their own country till there is nothing left to destroy. They have taken the wealth of the country, and with it purchased arms and munitions with which to fight each other. Now there is nothing left, neither money nor arms, and they turn their eyes to Hindustan.”

“Hindustan is not my country.”

“That is true,” acknowledged the Englishman. “Neither is it mine. But dost thou owe nothing to Hindustan for the shelter she hath given thee in thy need ? As for me, Hindustan is in the hands

of the English, and we are making of it a good country ; we will not see it spoilt and destroyed by these men."

"What is it thou would'st of me?"

"It is this." The Englishman dropped his voice and leaned across the desk. "These Russians would have the Afghans combine with them to invade and loot Hindustan. They have approached the Amir, but with what result we know not. He has been a steadfast friend and a faithful ally throughout this war ; but men's minds change, and we would know what face he now turns to these men. The one who goes on this mission must be one whose courage is beyond question——"

"More ghee?" queried Asaf Khan.

The Englishman shook his head. "It is the truth. This man must be a Pathan, and thou art a Pathan. Thou art no Afghan, so the Amir is naught to thee. Even if he were, we seek him no harm, rather do we wish him good. Nor is this the work of a spy. I ask thee but to go to Jelalabad where the Amir now dwells, and keep thine ears open to what men say. On thy return, tell me what thou wilt."

Asaf Khan looked shrewdly at the other.

"Where is the danger? Any man of the Border could do this for thee."

The Englishman smiled. "Then thou shalt have dahi (sour milk) with thy ghee. I chose thee because thou art as crafty and cunning as brave. It is said that no man of the Border is thine equal in craft."

"Where is the dahi?" asked Asaf Khan. "This is more ghee."

"If that be ghee, there is no more to be said,"

and the Englishman laughed shortly. "All thy craft will be needed. The Russian spy system had not its equal in the world ; and these spies, trained, and the best of their kind, are now Bolsheviks in the service of the Bolshevik leaders. These leaders seized by force the power they now have ; and they must be in hourly dread lest others in turn seize the power from them. He who would escape the notice of these spies must be crafty indeed. I await thine answer."

Asaf Khan pondered over the matter for some time before replying. The Amir of Afghanistan was naught to him, neither were the Bolsheviks. If they attempted to come to Hindustan, they would assuredly fail. He was tired of roaming ; to have a home of his own would be pleasant. To his old home he could never return ; he would make for himself a new home in Peshawar.

He will do as the Englishman asks. In return he will ask for land. On it he will build a house, and round the house shall be a garden with pomegranates and a fountain. Bulbuls will come there, and doves ; and in the morning he can sit near the fountain listening to the song of the birds, and in his thoughts be again in his mountain home. His son had taken the uniform of the English, and was now in a place the English called Mesopot, serving with a friend of Colonel Markham ; there would be a home in Peshawar to which his son could return when the fighting was done.

"I will do this," he said, "but I will not take money for my reward. Land will I have, as much

land as I shall require to build me a house on, a house with a spacious garden about it. The land must be given me, and the house must be built for me as I shall direct ; but the garden I will make myself, for I would have it like unto one I once saw." A shadow crossed his face as he thought of the far off garden of tragic memory.

"It is good," promised the Englishman. "All this thou shalt have, and more."

Asaf Khan rose to his feet.

"Now I go, O Wise One, who art not wise at all, but a fool who babbles secrets to a stranger. In the open streets shall I now proclaim all thou hast just said, and the Amir and the Bolsheviks will be warned. I gave no promise to be secret."

"And so shall the face of thy friend Colonel Markham be blackened in the sight of all men," said the Englishman quietly.

Asaf Khan smiled broadly. "Of a truth thou art rightly named the Wise One ; I shall say naught. I go now to Jelalabad to learn what I can."

By devious ways, travelling mostly by night, did Asaf Khan make his way to Jelalabad. The old days when on two days of the week a man could walk openly up the Khyber were past, and the time when they would do so once more was not yet come. Over the hills, up many a stony water-course, creeping low to pass over the crests of the ridges, shaping his course guided only by the instinct of the born mountaineer, Asaf Khan at last passed the Khyber, passed Dakka, and reached Jelalabad.

Across the plain lay the palace, the hills beyond

emerald and gold in the rays of the early morning sun. There dwelt the man whose thoughts he must read, whose likes and dislikes he must study ; but to that place he may not yet go. Removed a distance lay the barracks. The soldiers lived there, the soldiers who waited the decision of the One who dwelt in the palace, the soldiers who perchance in their impatience would some day force that decision. But neither to the barracks might Asaf Khan go. Still further removed lay the city, a heap of squalid huts relieved by but few high buildings. It was there Asaf Khan must go ; and there would he dwell until his mission be accomplished. Across the plain lay the graveyard ; but there Asaf Khan did not wish to go. He hoped he would not be taken there.

But surely this is not Asaf Khan ! This man with the black garments, with high black kulla and turban, with long straggling beard, with earrings in his ears and long strings of beads round his neck, surely this man is not Asaf Khan ! Some Holy Mullah is this man, some holy man who has given himself up to the service of Allah, whose sole mission in life is to wander from place to place reading and expounding the Holy Scriptures, living on the doles of the Faithful, his only delight to call the names of Allah hourly.

And yet a closer scrutiny would reveal that the ears are newly pierced, that the strings of shells hang awkwardly as on one unaccustomed to their wear ; that the black garments, though far from clean, are new. And though Mullahs are fierce and intolerant in their looks, surely no Mullah ever had gaze as in-

tolerant as came from beneath those low brows, no Mullah ever walked with so assured a stride.

In truth it was no Mullah. But in some such guise must Asaf Khan come ; for when men questioned him, what tale would he tell ? How could he, a stranger, account for his presence in Jelalabad ? What was he doing far from his home when all men kept to their homes ? But a Mullah may go anywhere and none question his goings and comings. A Mullah has no home ; the whole of Allah's earth is his home ; therefore as a Mullah had Asaf Khan come to Jelalabad.

To the city then did Asaf Khan take his way ; and going to a mosque, laid his small roll of bedding, his iron drinking vessel, and his other scanty belongings in a small room in the side wall of the mosque. The Mullah of the mosque, a venerable but exceedingly dirty old man, bade him welcome and gave him to eat. He showed little curiosity in the stranger, but much in what the stranger could tell him of the outer world ; for Asaf Khan did not disguise the fact that he was from parts far removed. He could not, for on the Border men and their kin are known for twenty miles around their homes, even to the fourteenth and fifteenth generation. But he said not that he came last from Peshawar. From the country of the Mahsuds he claimed to have come ; for that place was far and none from there would be in Jelalabad to question him.

Many tales did Asaf Khan tell the Mullah of the mosque, tales of holiness, tales of worldliness, and even tales that brought a shocked look to the old

Mullah's face, though his eyes twinkled behind their shrivelled lids, and he eagerly asked for more.

Many things did the Mullah in turn relate. How the Faithful gave each year less to the mosque. How they remembered not Allah in works of charity and the giving of alms as their fathers did, when a Mullah had more food than he could eat and that of the best quality, and more clothes than a dozen Mullahs could wear. Now they gave little, and that little not of the best. The food was ordinary, and not much; and the clothes——! The poor old man nearly choked with indignation.

So they talked, telling of many things; and presently the Mullah spoke of the Amir. The Amir was a good man, giving largely in charity. Once he had been inclined to evil. In his early manhood he had gone to Hindustan, and the men who went with him told many strange tales of his doings in that land. It was said that he neglected his own people, and went always with the English. He left Kabul as a great king should, with many retainers, with boxes of treasure to pay his expenses in the strange land, with troops to guard him. He went as a king, demanding from the English the land that was rightfully his, even the land of Hindustan as far as the Jhelum river, refusing the yearly bribe they would have given him to forego his claim, the bribe his father, the avaricious one, had accepted. Thus he went; but he returned the vassal of the English, willing to accept their money, selling for a sum the poor wretches of Hindustan who called

on him to come and save them from the intolerable yoke of the English.

Asaf Khan dropped his face to hide a smile. The Amir of Afghanistan in the role of a saviour of the down-trodden amused him.

It was even said—here the old Mullah leaned closer and spoke in a hushed voice of awe—it was even said that he had been to the magic house of the English (freemasons' hall) and had there been enrolled as one of their magicians !

Almost was he slain when he returned. For many days he was guarded by night and by day till men had forgotten his evil deeds.

But that was of the past. The follies and wickedness of his youth he had put aside, and he was now a good Mussulman, giving largely in charity, and showing respect to Mullahs.

In one thing the evil influences of his youth still clung to him, he would not give up his friendship with these English. Many had urged him, his uncle, his brothers, his officers of State ; his very soldiers had urged him to take them to the rescue of the poor wretches of Hindustan. But he would listen to none.

The white races had been fighting among themselves ; then was his time. The white troops had all been sent from Hindustan to save their own country which had been over-run by the enemy ; then was his time. But he would do naught. He said he had eaten salt with the English and was their friend for all time.

“I know naught of these things,” said Asaf Khan

the crafty, "but according to thine own saying he had eaten salt with the English."

The Mullah gave him a pitying look. "Are they of the Faith? Do they revere our Holy Prophet? Or do they revile him? Among Mussulmans the eating of salt together is holy and binding; but who keeps faith with the Infidel even if salt be eaten together? In former days men read not the words of our Holy Prophet aright, and thought the eating of salt together binding in all cases; but now in Roum (Turkey) hath the true meaning of the words been discovered, and the eating of salt with the Infidel is not binding on the Faithful. Thou art young, my son; age will bring thee reason."

"Do the people of Hindustan indeed call on the Amir of Afghanistan to rescue them from the harsh rule of the English?" ventured Asaf Khan.

"They do indeed," replied the old man. "Hundreds of letters have come in years past from all parts of Hindustan praying him to come. Many escaped from that land of tyranny when the great war began, and fleeing to Afghanistan begged the Amir to come and save their country from the rule of these Infidels. But he would not. He leaves men of the Faith under the yoke of the Infidel and will not go to their rescue!"

Asaf Khan's brows knitted in thought. That the people of Hindustan reviled the English in spite of all the English had done for them, he knew; but he little thought that in their folly they had gone to such suicidal lengths. They had known Mussulman rule; were they mad enough to desire it again!

“The Hindus of Hindustan know not when Allah is merciful,” he remarked.

The old Mullah gazed at him in surprise.

“The Hindus? Who speaks of those Kafirs?” and he spat. “It is of the Faithful I speak. It is true that, deceived by the specious words and promises of our brethren in Hindustan some of the Kafirs have openly said they would prefer the rule of our Amir; but they are fools! The Hindus!” again he spat. “The Hindus shall be once more the slaves of the Faithful, even as they were in the days before the English came!”

Asaf Khan’s brows cleared. He knew the class of man who had been sending messages to the Amir; for he had heard of one or two indiscreet utterances on the part of the Amir while in Hindustan.

“So the Amir will not break friendship with the English?”

The Mullah nodded his head mysteriously.

“He will not; but Allah alone knows what the future holds in store. There be strangers who come from Russe, and it is said that all press the Amir to give ear to them.”

Many things learnt Asaf Khan from the babbling old man; and after he had listened for a space he went forth into the bazaar to learn what other men said.

In all places did he hear the same. The words he had heard spoken on the Border years ago, he now heard in Afghanistan. The English spoke falsely. They were not victorious, and the fighting had but ceased for a time. Presently would Russia and

Germany combine, for the Germans were the friends of the Russians, selling them guns and powder; and when Germany and Russia united, who could withstand their might! Few British soldiers were left in Hindustan; all had been called back to their country to help her in her desperate need. The Indian troops were half Sikh and half Mussulman; the Afghans had but to advance, and the Mussulmans would come over to their side as one man. Even the Sikhs would welcome them with open arms. Asaf Khan smiled to himself at this last, for he had known Sikhs.

And the One who had but to march down to Hindustan to be the master of that rich country would not act! Daily was he importuned; by his relations, for they would be governors of this new country; by his soldiers, for there each man would be a Khan with the wealth of many Khans; by his wives, for the riches of Delhi and Lucknow would be theirs, and there would be no stint of jewels and rich dresses in the harem. But always the Amir turned a deaf ear to their entreaties.

This was good hearing to Asaf Khan; if the Amir stood firm, all was well. But other whispers, dark and sinister, did he also hear. With bated breath men hinted at what might be if the Amir would not listen to their counsel. The Amir was weak; he had shown it in his dealings with his own people. Men there were who had spoken openly against him, and these men went unpunished even to that day. What could men expect of a ruler who could not keep order in his own house? There was Another—but

this was said in the lowest of whispers, and after much glancing over the shoulder to see that no stranger lingered near—Another there was who was of a different mind. Another was willing to lead them to Hindustan. Another there was who spoke often of the shame that was theirs in being deaf to the call of their brothers in Hindustan. Another, who feared not the English, who would drive the English into the sea ! But of this Other would no man take the name.

Asaf Khan thought of these things as he sat in the dusk smoking his hookah, a hookah lent to him by the old Mullah, and brought to him prepared by the old Mullah's wife ; and he wondered who this Other of whom men spoke could be. Nasirulla Khan, the brother of the Amir, could he be the man ? But he was well on in years, he had seen the English, he had even been to England ; surely he was not the one. Age and experience would have taught him the madness of such a course. Or was it that he but sought to be Amir ? Such things have been.

There was Inayatulla, the eldest son of the Amir ; he would not be the first son who sought to supplant, even to murder, his father for the sake of a throne. Which of these two was that Other ? If he could but see these men close, he would know, for Asaf Khan was a reader of men's faces. He must seek a way.

Asaf Khan knew the source whence came these whispers of Another, these tales of Russia, of Germany, and of England. He was not the only stranger in Jelalabad. Others there were, men strange of

face and speech, short men with red faces, who spoke Pusto with the harsh accent of the Northern foreigner. But Asaf Khan went not near these men. Naught could he learn from them; and he feared lest his anger betray him when they spoke their lies to the people.

And so Asaf Khan dwelt in Jelalabad in the mosque with the old Mullah. Money he had by him, money that was given him, so he said, as a thank-offering by a man who in his old age had become the father of a son; and for a sum the old Mullah consented to feed Asaf Khan till the time when the word to depart should come to him in a dream; for it is thus a Mullah knows when his work in one place is done and Allah would have him go elsewhere. The old man showed his toothless gums in a grin when Asaf Khan gave the reason for the thank-offering; for he also was a Mullah, and in the days when he was young Allah had often granted his prayer when he prayed that the young wife of an old man might have a son.

And yet such is the blindness of man, that the young wife of the old Mullah cooked for Asaf Khan and prepared for him his hookah. Perchance the old Mullah watched Asaf Khan for the first few days, and seeing that this man was a hater of women, thought all was well. But he did not watch his wife.

As to Asaf Khan; he thought no more of the woman than he would of a servant who ministered to his wants. His thoughts were on other things; and he knew not whether the woman were young or old, fair or ill-favoured.

And it chanced that after Asaf Khan had dwelt some days in Jelalabad, he walked on the road leading towards Kabul, the fair road the Amir had caused to be made when he brought from Hindustan the strange carriages that filled the people with wonder and forebodings. For these carriages were not drawn by horses, nor did they go as the fire engines of the English went, with steam and smoke and a loud noise. These moved silently over the roads, swift as a bird can fly, and were surely the work of the Evil One. Many vowed that after these carriages passed the scent of Hell lingered in the air. Ill would come of it ; for these carriages were works of magic and were evil.

Now, as Asaf Khan returned from walking upon the road, while he was yet a mile from the palace, one of these carriages came rushing from the hills. Asaf Khan had seen many in Hindustan, and knew there was no magic in them ; therefore, though he stepped aside to let it pass, he did not flee. As he moved off the road, the carriage stopped.

There were two in the carriage, the man who sat in front and drove, another, who sat behind. Could he believe his eyes ? The Amir !

Something had happened to the car, something the man could not put right ; for after a few minutes the Amir ordered him to go fetch another. The man left ; and the Amir, drawing from his pocket a copy of the Koran, prepared to read. But before he read he cast his eyes around to see that no danger threatened ; for always was his life in danger as he well knew, and his eyes fell on Asaf Khan.

This man was a Mullah ; he would pass the time in conversation with this holy man till such time as his servant returned. There would be no danger in conversing with a Mullah ; nevertheless he drew from his pocket a pistol that fired many shots and placed it on the seat beside him. He beckoned to the Mullah.

Asaf Khan approached the car and salaamed humbly. He saw the pistol lying ready to the Amir's hand, and a grim smile crossed his lips ; for he had seen the motion that placed it there before the Amir beckoned him.

"Thou art a Mullah," said the Amir. "With Mullahs am I always happy to converse; for they speak not of this world, but of the next."

Asaf Khan pointed to the pistol. "And before calling this Mullah thou did'st prepare thyself, lest he not only talk to thee of the next world, but also send thee thither."

The Amir smiled gravely. The humour of this strange Mullah whom he had not seen before in Jelalabad pleased him. Also he was a student of men, reading the characters of all around him except those whose characters he should have studied most. But in those cases his heart was blinded by love ; and it was fate. He was pleased by what he saw in the face before him. This was a man, he would talk with him a space.

"Know, O Mullah," he said, "that all are not holy who wear the guise of holiness."

"And know, O Amir," returned Asaf Khan, "that all are not safe who wear an appearance of safety."

Dropping a fold of his garment he showed in his left hand a pistol wherewith he covered the Amir. Another movement, and his right hand was shown grasping his great Afghan knife.

If he thought to alarm the other, he was mistaken. The Amir gazed at him steadily.

“Who hath paid thee to do this thing?”

Asaf Khan slipped the pistol into a side pocket, the knife into the hidden belt.

“None have paid me, O Great One. I did but show thee that despite the pistol at thy side I could have slain thee at my will. And another thing have I shown thee. It is thus thy days and nights are spent; always the pistol at thy breast, the dagger at thy back!”

The Amir smiled sadly. “It may be so. It is as Allah wills.”

Then was Asaf Khan wroth with this man, Amir though he be, and he upbraided him with bitter words. Why was he so mild, so lenient to those who offended, so weak? Men walked openly in the light of day, who in his father's time would have dwelt in darkness, buried in the depths of some dank dungeon, perchance their eyeballs pierced to make the darkness doubly deep. Men walked whole who in his father's time would have crawled the streets begging alms of the charitable, a warning to all men. Why should these things be? This was not to rule as a great king should rule!

The Amir listened in silence; and when Asaf Khan had finished, he smiled a sad smile.

“Are not our fates written? What must be, must

be. Thou callest me Great One ; but only Allah is great. I am but the servant of my people ; for thus, and not as thou sayest, should a great king rule. I love my people, they are my children ; can a man be harsh with his children ? Death I fear not. Allah will protect his servant till the day comes when it is written I shall go to enjoy the delights of Paradise."

"And that day will be soon !" said Asaf Khan grimly. But though Asaf Khan was wroth, his heart was filled with pity for this man who was indeed one of Allah's chosen ; this man who would have been a saint, revered of all, his memory handed down to the veneration of generations yet unborn, had he been other than what he was, a king. And Asaf Khan swore in his heart that if aught he could do would save this man from the death that hovered so near, that he would do, even to the giving up of his own life.

But of his thoughts he said naught to the Amir ; and when the other asked him whence he came, he said from the Mahsud country. Once he had property and land ; but being fond of the society of Mullahs, he spent all his time with them, listening while they expounded the meaning of some hidden passage of the Koran. But while he passed his time thus, his relations conspired together and deprived him of his land. Also they would have slain him had he not received timely warning and departed from that place. Now he was a Mullah and had no home.

"The world is thy home," said the Amir gravely. "Allah's wide, beautiful earth is all thine. How

blest is now thy lot ! To spend thy days in prayer, to read and expound the Holy Koran to those who cannot read and are therefore denied the bliss of reading for themselves the Holy Words of our Sainted Prophet ! What happiness is thine !”

Then was Asaf Khan ashamed with a great shame. This man was greater than any king ; he was a saint ! And he lied to this man ! But the thought that it was for this man’s good he lied, comforted him ; and again he vowed that he would do his utmost to save this man from the death that threatened so darkly.

And so for a space they talked, till presently a car came up the road ; and bidding Asaf Khan come to the palace on the morrow that they might converse further, the Amir departed.

Slowly and in deep thought did Asaf Khan wend his way back to the mosque. How could he convince this man of his danger ? How persuade him to guard himself ? All his craft was of no avail, for it was not for him to say what should be done, it was for the other. He knew how to compel, for he had compelled many. He knew how to deceive, for he had deceived even more than he had compelled. But persuasion was foreign to his nature, and of the art he knew naught. He was a warrior ; persuasion was for women. For women ? There was a woman at the mosque, the woman who prepared his food and hookah ; it might be that woman’s wit would see a way out of this tangle.

Then did Asaf Khan the most foolish act of his life ; for he sought the aid of a woman, he whose bane was woman.

The old Mullah was from home that evening ; and when the woman brought him his food, Asaf Khan spoke to her, asking of her father and her House.

Now, this woman was young and was married to an old man, and as is the way of women, she longed for a child. Two full years she waited ; and when no child came to bless her, she sought to remove the reproach of childlessness by taking a lover. Yet was she a good woman, and had it not been for this matter of a child, she would never have done this evil. But a child she must have ; and after much thought she chose a young man who came daily to the mosque. Full well she knew why he came. Often had she marked his eye wandering to where she sat plying her needle ; for she was a cunning needle-woman and worked embroideries for the ladies of the harem, who often sent for her to teach them a new stitch.

But even after she had chosen the young man to be the father of her child, it was long ere she gave any sign. The modesty of a woman is not lightly cast aside, and to this time the woman had been modest.

At last one day she let her eyes meet his and linger in the glance. It was enough. In the East the language of the eyes is as easily read as the written word ; and that night came the young man and waited without the wall of the mosque. But though he waited long, and coughed often, the woman came not. Filled with shame for what she had done, she lay with her head buried in the blankets and would

hear naught. The next day the young man came to the mosque ; but though he sighed so much that the Mullah marked it and gave him a pill to cure his disorder, she avoided his eyes that day and on the next. On the third day came Asaf Khan, and she forgot the young man.

This must be the father of her child ; for the son of such a man would be a son to be proud of indeed, a very man ! But this was a Mullah, a holy man ; he must be approached with caution lest he turn on her in his wrath and betray her to her husband. For many days she watched Asaf Khan, forgetting the young man ; but the young man did not forget. Daily he came, and always he watched for a sign ; but the sign came not, and presently he knew the reason.

Then was the heart of the young man filled with hate towards the woman who had treated him thus ; and also did he hate Asaf Khan, for he thought Asaf Khan had taken the woman from him. At first he would have betrayed the woman to her husband ; but the husband was old, the woman was young, and all know that an old man is but wax in the hands of a young woman. He would watch ; and presently he would lead the deceived husband to their guilty couch. But though he watched always, he saw naught that would open the eyes of the deceived husband, for Asaf Khan nor looked at the woman, nor spoke to her. They were on their guard, thought the young man. He would bide his time ; when the flame of love burnt more fiercely, then would be his chance.

On the night of the day Asaf Khan met the Amir, for the first time he spoke to the woman ; and she, thinking he had at last marked her fairness, was filled with joy. But she hid this joy and answered him in a seemly manner, so that Asaf Khan thought no harm.

Then did he put her a question.

“ Tell me, O woman,” he said “ There is one I would bend to my will. I may not use force, I must persuade, and of persuasion I know naught. How shall I persuade that one to do my will ? Thou art a woman, and to woman is given the art of persuading others to do their will. Tell me, then, how I shall do this thing ! ”

Crafty was Asaf Khan, guarded and well-chosen were his words, that the woman might not know of whom he spoke ; but in his craft he over-reached himself, for the woman put another meaning to his words.

“ He loves a woman,” she thought, “ and I am that woman ! ” and she pressed her hand to her breast to still the beating of her heart. But Asaf Khan saw not the movement, for her hand was hidden in the folds of her garment.

Yet such is the heart of woman, that again did this woman falter, even as she had faltered when she would have given herself to the young man. For a space she stood with lowered head, her veiled eyes on the ground, and Asaf Khan thought she pondered over the question.

Presently the woman raised her head.

“ I go to the palace to-morrow,” she said, “ to

teach embroidery to the ladies of the harem. On the fourth day will I return and give thee thine answer."

Four days ! Many things might happen in four days ; and Asaf Khan pressed her for an answer that night. But the more he urged, the more she drew back ; and presently she passed swiftly to the room in which she and her husband dwelt. Scarce could she breathe for the beating of her heart ; and if she stayed, she knew she must throw herself at the feet of this simple man who thought she needed persuasion, when for many days past she had but to be asked.

Asaf Khan was angered that the woman gave him no answer ; but he would have been more angered had he known the meaning the woman had put to his words. He would have been more than angered had he known that one crouched near in hiding, watching and listening.

Now at last the young man had something to tell ; and stealing softly away, for he feared Asaf Khan and his wrath, he met the old man outside the mosque and told him all. Not all, for he spoke not of himself and the woman before the day that Asaf Khan came ; but he told the husband what Asaf Khan had said to the woman, telling him also much that Asaf Khan had not said.

Then was the old Mullah wroth, and he would have upbraided Asaf Khan with his hypocrisy and treachery to his host ; but the young man restrained him. Not so, he urged, for they would deny all. The woman must go to the palace for four days ; on her return

they would both watch, and would take the guilty pair in their guilt.

At last the old man consented. But after that he spoke no more with Asaf Khan, burying himself in the Koran when the other approached ; and as Asaf Khan had now to go outside for his food, and had many things to fill his mind, they spoke no more to each other.

Next day went Asaf Khan, Mullah, to the palace. He was a Mullah, and the Holy Ones go where they list, none daring to say them nay. Also the Amir had borne him in mind and had spoken of the Mullah who would come to have speech with him on the morrow. So was the way made clear ; and entering the palace, Asaf Khan passed to the chamber where the Amir sat.

The Great One sat alone on a rug, a silver hookah to his hand ; and around him were grouped men of his court, his brother, his two elder sons, and some of the officials who were also his friends—or called themselves his friends, though Allah knows what was in their hearts.

Now, Asaf Khan knew naught of the ways of courts and kings ; so there were no prostrations, no touching of the sacred carpet with the forehead ; a low salaam was all Asaf Khan gave the great Amir, and stepping aside, he seated himself in a corner and began to tell his beads.

Many frowned ; but most shrugged their shoulders. It was not their business, and the Amir had brought it upon himself. If he were angered, let him turn the insolent Mullah out

But the Amir was not angered. This was a holy man, a man of God. He was greater than princes, why should he abase himself before one? He would have spoken; but the holy man was absorbed in his devotions, and he forebore to disturb him. Turning to his courtiers, he resumed the conversation the coming of the Mullah had interrupted.

Asaf Khan sat in the corner; and while he told his beads, from beneath his lowered lids he studied the faces of those who talked. And first he looked at the Amir.

This man was a good man, a just man; but his justice was tempered with too much mercy. His face inclined to weakness and irresolution; and Asaf Khan marvelled how he had remained so long the ruler of the fierce, treacherous Afghans. And then Asaf Khan's glance wandered to the face of Nasirulla Khan, the brother of the Amir, the second son of the terrible Abdur Rahman. Abdur Rahman! Abdur the Compassionate!

No weakness was here. This was the face of a man whose will was stronger than the wills of any about him. But the lines of the face showed self-repression—as must the face of any strong man who had lived through the reign of Abdur Rahman. It was not a good face, nor was it bad; it was the face of a man of strong will and passions who had learned to curb both will and passions. Also it was a clever face; not the face of one who would be deceived by the tales brought by the men of the North. If indeed he urged his brother to invade Hindustan, it was not that he thought his brother

would succeed ; it was for some deep reason of his own, perchance the hope that his brother would destroy himself against the English, and make way for one, to his thinking, more worthy. Himself he would not lead an army to what he must know would be his and their certain destruction. Of this Asaf Khan was assured. He was not the Other of whom men spoke.

On Inayatulla Khan, the eldest son of the Amir, did Asaf Khan's gaze next turn.

Then was the heart of Asaf Khan filled with great sorrow for the Amir ; for this his eldest son was a fool. He sat in a rich dress, lolling negligently back on some cushions, the weak lines of his mouth, the puffy eyelids, the depending cheeks, all telling the same tale—a tale of selfish indulgence and sloth. Asaf Khan averted his gaze. This was not that Other, he must look elsewhere. His gaze wandered to the second son.

This might be that Other, this man with the keen eyes and firm lips. This man had seen naught of the world as had his brother and his uncle ; he knew only what others told him. He was ignorant, and knew not truth from falsehood when men spoke of other lands and peoples. Maybe he had listened to the words of the men of the North and believed them. This man he must watch.

Courtiers are trained to hide their feelings ; else are they no courtiers, nor will they long retain their posts near their ruler ; and well Asaf Khan knew the uselessness of studying the faces of those of the court who sat before the Amir. But he watched them

keenly on that and other days ; for a man cannot be always on his guard, and a glance can betray as clearly as the spoken word. Even the movement of a finger may sometimes betray.

And after Asaf Khan had sat for a while thus, telling his beads, he raised his head and let the strings slip from his fingers.

“ At thy command have I come, O Great One.”

For long did the Amir talk with Asaf Khan on many points of the Faith. Asaf Khan was no trained Mullah ; but with many Mullahs had he talked, his memory was good, and of late he had talked much with the old Mullah of the mosque. Also every Mussulman has the tenets of the Faith instilled into him from his earliest years, and can ever after talk thereon, quoting texts from the Koran, with chapter and verse.

Long they talked ; till with gracious words the Amir dismissed Asaf Khan, bidding him come on the morrow ; and Asaf Khan left the chamber.

Now it chanced that the man who should have been standing at the door had left on some errand, so that Asaf Khan had to find his way to the entrance alone. And as he walked, he passed a woman.

Though he knew it not, for her face was closely veiled, this was the young wife of the old Mullah of the mosque ; and seeing him, the woman's heart beat fast. He had followed her even here, here to the palace of the Amir ! But not yet could she give him the answer he craved, and she hurried past with lowered head.

Each day she watched, marking Asaf Khan as he

came and went ; and once she stood in the passage so that his clothes brushed hers as he passed. But she spoke no word, for another was in the passage ; and also she would wait, as she had said, till the fourth day. But now was she of one mind. This was the man of her choice ; this man should be the father of her child.

Little thought Asaf Khan that the woman was near, for he thought not of her at all ; greater matters were toward. Still less did he think two watched his comings and goings day and night, an old man and a young, the husband and the lover of the woman of the mosque.

On the first day, his eyes quickened by jealousy, had the young man marked Asaf Khan going to the palace ; and running to the Mullah had told him what he had seen. Each day thereafter did they watch Asaf Khan going to the palace to meet the woman who had betrayed her husband thus vilely, and each evening did they watch him return from the guilty meeting. But the time was not yet, and they held their peace. Asaf Khan must have a friend at the palace who admitted him. This friend would deny that Asaf Khan had met the woman, and would be their enemy from that day. Also such things must not be said of the palace of the Amir, where no evil can come. They would wait till the woman returned to her home, and then take vengeance on the guilty pair.

Daily went Asaf Khan to the bazaar to hear of what men spoke, and daily went he to the palace to watch the faces of those who sat before the Amir.

The rumours in the bazaar grew darker ; and watching the faces in the Durbar, Asaf Khan knew that these men also had heard the rumours, perchance had started some. But Inayatulla Khan knew naught of these rumours. Sunk in sloth, he heeded but his own pleasures, regardless of aught else. His brother might know somewhat, but his face Asaf Khan could not read. Nasirulla Khan was not at ease, and therefore he had heard ; but he seemed troubled in mind, and not as one who heard success. The others, the courtiers, knew of these rumours ; each one knew, knowing also who that Other was of whom men spake with bated breath. Who was this Other ? The Amir had sons in Kabul, could one of them be he ?

On the fourth day, after coming from the palace, Asaf Khan went to the bazaar to eat. He had returned later than usual from the palace, and after he had eaten, he sat apart for a while ere returning to the mosque. Others would come and eat, he would listen, unobserved, to what they said.

For some time he heard naught that bore upon his mission. Talk of the weather, of the price of foodstuffs, of the rumours that came from India and from Russia. The hour grew late. He was about to leave, when he heard a word that made him pause and sink silently like a shadow to the ground.

The two who spoke were not at the shop. They had eaten, and now sat apart as Asaf Khan did. The trunk of a plum tree rose between and they saw not Asaf Khan reclining there, else had their speech been more guarded.

“ At last it has come,” were the first words Asaf Khan heard, “ and to-morrow’s sun will see a new Amir, a Man ! ”

“ It is time,” said the other. “ Too long have we tarried. Our friends from the North have been here many days with offers of their help ; yet here we still bide in idleness. Now all shall be changed. Now shall a Man lead us ; and we shall go to Hindustan where each shall be a wealthy Khan with lands and slaves. Pray Allah the plan miscarry not ! Yet I think the matter is in good hands. This is the hour, is it not ? ”

“ It is,” replied the first speaker. “ Even now the deed may be done. Even now the palace may be in confusion while men run wildly from room to room and women wail, and the Amir lies silent in his chamber, his soul in Paradise. For though he was a bad king, he was in truth a good man, and from Allah will he receive his reward. Let us return to the barracks that we may be prepared when the news comes.”

They moved away ; and rising to his feet, Asaf Khan sped swiftly into the darkness. Yah Allah ! If he be too late ! Little dreamt he that the danger was so close ! Even now the Amir, the one he had sworn to save, might be lying dead !

Presently the palace loomed through the darkness. All was silent. A few lights twinkled from the windows ; but there was no noise, no confusion. He was then in time ! In time to warn and save ! But how could he gain admittance to the palace at that hour ? He might not even enter the grounds ! A

Mullah has many privileges, but even a Mullah may not enter the palace grounds at night without permission.

To ask permission would be to put on their guard those whose works were evil ; for they would guess why he sought the Amir at that hour, and would act at once. He must enter secretly. He slackened his pace, and sought for a spot where he might enter the palace grounds.

Enter by the gate he dared not, for there were men who guarded it night and day ; he must climb the wall. Once inside, he could return to the road from the gate to the palace, for none would be on it at that hour. If any came, he could hide till they passed ; but by the road he must go, for he knew not the palace grounds and might lose precious time. The wall was low, and presently he came to a place where a tree overhung the wall. In a moment he was over, and in the palace grounds.

Now it chanced that the woman had been unable to leave the palace in the afternoon, and it was late ere the ladies of the harem gave her permission to leave. But late as it was, she would not stay in the palace that night. This was the fourth day, and on the fourth day she had promised Asaf Khan an answer to his question. He might be asleep, but she thought not. What mattered if he were, the answer she would give would wake him. With her arms and her lips she would give the answer, and he would not sleep long.

Perchance he waited for her at the palace gate ! She had said she would return from the palace on

the fourth day ; what more likely than that he, impatient at her late return, awaited her without the palace gate ! For he was impatient ; else had he not come daily to the palace in the hope of seeing her.

And as she passed down the road to the great gate, a form slipped from the road and hid behind a bush. But the woman feared not. The eyes of love are sharp, and in the form she recognized one she knew. Such was the impatience of Asaf Khan to hear her answer, that he had even ventured into the palace grounds ! Softly she stepped till she reached the bush, and then she breathed his name.

“Asaf Khan ! O Asaf Khan ! Seekest thou admission to the palace ? I will show thee the way.” For she sought to play with him a while, pretending she knew not why he came.

Then was Asaf Khan filled with great amazement. He recognized the voice as that of the wife of the old Mullah of the mosque, and here was this woman offering him entrance to the palace ! But how knew she that he desired admittance ? That could wait. In a few minutes he would be within the palace, for this woman would take him there, and the Amir would be saved. He stepped from behind the bush.

Little as the man and woman knew it, another witnessed this meeting. When the woman came not in the evening, the young man went to the eating-house to watch Asaf Khan ; and when Asaf Khan sped to the palace, he followed. The mosque lay on the way ; and darting in at the open door he

told the old man of what was toward. The woman had deceived them. She would not return on the morrow as they had thought, she would return that night ; and Asaf Khan had gone to meet her ! Perchance she would never return ! Bidding the husband follow, he raced on in the wake of Asaf Khan.

He ran fast, and because Asaf Khan slackened his pace as he approached the palace, wondering how he should gain admittance, the young man overtook him and was not far behind when he climbed the palace wall.

The young man followed ; and creeping stealthily from bush to bush, stole after Asaf Khan down the palace road. And so it came to pass that as Asaf Khan and the woman stood together, the young man was but a pace and a half away.

When the woman saw Asaf Khan standing before her, her heart melted with love ; and flinging her arms around his neck she buried her face in his bosom. Too amazed to speak, Asaf Khan stood motionless for an instant ; and the young man sprang.

With upraised hand he sprang and plunged his knife, not into Asaf Khan, as he had meant, but into the woman who, with a swift movement, had placed herself between.

Shaking himself free of the woman, Asaf Khan leapt on the young man, not waiting to draw his knife. Fierce as a tiger's was his spring ; and seizing the young man's head, he bent it back till the neck broke. Casting the body from him, he stepped back to escape the clasp of the woman, who had dragged herself towards him and was striving to speak through

the blood which poured from her throat and choked her. And as he stepped back, there came a shrill cry from the palace.

He was too late ! The deed had been done ! Had it not been for this wretched woman and this mad-man, he might have been in time to save. But he might yet be in time to avenge ! Asaf Khan sped towards the palace.

The great door opened as he approached ; and dashing aside the one who opened it, Asaf Khan darted down the passage to where he knew the Amir's bedchamber lay ; for the Amir had taken him there one day to show him a book.

The whole palace was alive with light and noise ; for ill news travels faster than the wind, and many there were who waited for this news, knowing it would come. The shrill screams of women echoed through the corridors and passages, the harsh shouts of men calling to each other. Lamps blazed in every room, many of them ready trimmed for the lighting.

Asaf Khan plunged on through the crowd ; and bursting into the chamber he sought, beheld a sight he had hoped never to see. There lay the Amir on his bed, on his face a look of great peace ; and around him stood courtiers and attendants gazing on their dead lord. Nasirulla Khan was standing at the head ; and with a cry of rage Asaf Khan sprang at him.

“Thou art the man !” and he seized Nasirulla Khan by the throat.

But help was near. Many hands seized Asaf Khan and dragged him off struggling and fighting, and

Nasirulla Khan rose from the ground where he had fallen. He gazed for a space at Asaf Khan, and a cunning look leapt up in his eyes.

“Yah Allah! Had I been in my room I had now been dead, even as my poor brother is dead! He would have slain both! Ye seek the murderer of our beloved Amir; behold him before ye! This pretended Mullah is the man! For this did he gain the favour of the Amir; that he might know the ways of the palace when the time came! Behold the blood on his clothes! The blood of my poor brother! What other has blood upon his clothes? None! This is the man! He is the murderer!”

Then did Asaf Khan see the danger in which he stood. All men knew or guessed who had done this deed, but all would shield the culprit. But a murderer must be produced. The blood of the woman was still wet upon his clothes; he would be the one produced. Death he feared not; but the death he would die at the hands of these men was a death no man would wish to die.

With a savage wrench he tore himself free, and instantly was through the open door. Escape by the great entrance he could not, and towards the harem he turned his steps. Women would be there, and they would scream; but they could not detain him. He would seek a low window and drop into the palace grounds.

On he tore, followed by those who poured from the chamber of death, jostling and hindering each other in their eagerness. Down a corridor, up a flight of steps. He had out-distanced his pursuers, but

had not shaken them off. They guessed which way he would go ; and the cries of the women would soon guide them. But he must go on. Into the first sacred chamber of the harem he burst, slamming the door behind him, and the pursuers hesitated.

But Nasirulla Khan urged them on. At such a time women's feelings must not be considered. Even the sacred precincts of the harem must not be respected. The door was bolted from the other side ; but they brought benches and burst it open and rushed in. The room was empty, and they raced through into the next. But though they searched every room, and questioned the women, no trace of Asaf Khan did they find.

The women could tell little, for all had huddled in corners with hidden faces when they heard the door assailed ; yet still, they would have heard if one passed. They had heard nothing. At last, in the front room, the one with the broken door, they found Inayatulla Khan lying in a corner, bound hand and foot, and gagged.

It was there Asaf Khan had found him, trembling and pale ; and springing upon him, in an instant Asaf Khan had bound and gagged him. To push Inayatulla Khan behind a curtain, and to throw the long embroidered robe over his own garments, was the work of an instant. The turban he tied even as the door was being burst from its hinges—for Inayatulla wore a turban, not a cap as his father the Amir did—and drawing on the gold slippers, Asaf Khan stepped behind a curtain as the door fell.

None thought of searching the first room. All

were eager to pursue the murderer ; and they passed through the next door in a body.

Asaf Khan also left the room ; but he left by the broken door, and retracing his steps, made his way rapidly to the great entrance. A few spoke to him, but he made a sign for silence ; and though one or two may have wondered, most men in the palace that night thought they knew the meaning of the sign. The man at the door he brushed aside ; and throwing off the robe and turban in the shadow of the nearest bush, Asaf Khan sped across the grounds in his black garments to the place where he had climbed the wall.

CHAPTER XI

HOW ASAF KHAN LOST HIS HORSE, AND GAINED SEVEN RINGS

THOUGH Asaf Khan saw not the fairness of the Mullah's wife, not always had he shunned women ; in his young manhood he was always ready to meet the fair one half way. For it is not in the East as in the West. In a land where all women are guarded jealously, nor even permitted to leave the sacred zenana apartments save, veiled and in the company of others, all women a man meets are alike in his sight. The boorkha may cover the charms of a houri, it may hide a hag. Therefore is it the woman who makes her choice.

Handsome was Asaf Khan, and of a goodly presence, and many a message did he receive from fair ones who saw him once and would see him again. Always was he ready, and many a joyous adventure had he ; but one was like to have proved his last.

It was in the days between the day when he escaped from the house of the Mahsud maiden, and the day on which he left the bridal gift of a shoe with a woman that this befell. Not yet had he met the one real love of his life, the love that was to be the last he should ever feel for woman.

The journey had been long ; and Asaf Khan's frame was not yet the iron and steel it was afterwards to become. He was weary, and the good steed he bestrode was still more weary ; for they had journeyed far that day, and the road was hard. He rode in the Afghan country, and in that land there is but one road, the great highway by which the caravans pass ; all others are mere stony hill-tracks.

But he must push on, for the place to which he would go was still far. In the Afghan country a man of the Border may not dwell where he lists ; for there he is a stranger. Places there are where he may stay, where the men of many lands rest on their journey through Afghanistan ; but in other places, to stay is to die. Robbers are the people of those parts, robbers and slayers of men ; therefore will not travellers pass through those parts.

But Asaf Khan feared no man ; that way was the shorter, and that way he went. Hard would it go with the man who meddled with him by day. But man must rest ; man must sleep ; and when the frame is wearied and the eyelids droop, heavy with sleep, how can a man guard against a foe who watches and bides his time ? Therefore did Asaf Khan press his horse forward that day ; for this was bad country, and he would reach a place where he might rest in peace.

In a few moments the sun would set, but the place for which Asaf Khan sought came not in view. Was he going aright ? In these parts had he never been before ; but at the last stopping place he had been directed to journey due east till he saw two high peaks, and between the peaks must he pass. He had seen, not two high peaks, but six. Choosing the two highest,

he had passed between, and should be now at the mussafir khana he sought. But no serai, no village, no sign of life whatever could he see ; he must have chosen the wrong two peaks to pass between.

Now did Asaf Khan repent him of his haste. Many had warned him to go by the longer way, but he had taken no heed. Perchance he might have listened ; but one spoke of this road saying it was the shorter, but a road by which only a brave man could pass. It was enough. By this road would Asaf Khan go, and by no other.

And then, even as he wondered if he must pass the night in the open, perched on the hillside he saw a village, a strong, stone-walled village, and beside the village a house that was also a fort.

This was not the place to which he would have gone, for the village was small ; but rest he must have, for his horse if not for himself ; the animal was spent and a storm was brewing on the hills. Already great masses of clouds from which came the low muttering roll of distant thunder were gathering in the west. He hastened on, and presently stood before the village gates. They were closed ; and then did Asaf Khan know that he was in bad country indeed for the gates to be closed thus early.

Dismounting, he picked up a stone and with it hammered on the gate. A face appeared at one of the flanking towers, a face that scowled and mouthed curses. A cold welcome, thought Asaf Khan ; but the storm was near, and dissembling his anger, Asaf Khan spoke the man fair, asking shelter for himself and horse within the village for one night.

The man in the tower shook his head.

“No shelter shalt thou have within this village,” he said. “Here may no stranger dwell the night ; thus is the order of the Khan. Go thou elsewhere.”

“But the storm comes on apace, and I know not whither to seek other shelter,” objected Asaf Khan. “I am alone ; what hast thou and thy Khan to fear from one man ? ”

The man in the tower shook his head again.

“Once it chanced that a stranger craved admittance at sunset. He was allowed within ; and that night his friends came. Half the men of our village died ere we drove out those men, and since that day hath no stranger dwelt within our village after sundown.”

Asaf Khan looked around. No other shelter could he see, and the dark clouds were now gathering overhead.

“Send word to thy Khan,” he urged. “Surely he would not turn even a dog from his door on such a night ! ”

For the third time the man of the tower shook his head ; and again Asaf Khan looked at the sky. But now he looked not at the clouds ; his brain was working craftily, for in that village he meant to pass the night. He would anger the man—

“Pig ! ” he shouted suddenly. “Son of a pig ! ” Stooping down he picked up a stone and hurled it at the man. “Coward ! who fears to admit a man unarmed and alone, to his village ! ”

Now to call a man a pig is a wrong which may not easily be forgiven ; to call him the son of a pig is an offence that may be wiped out only in blood. The man made a snatch at his gun ; but when he looked out the one who had abused him thus vilely was not. Being a coward, his courage all in his tongue, he had

fled. The man turned to replace his gun, and received a violent blow from a stone in the back.

With a snarl of rage he spun round, but still no man could he see. The vile one who smote people in the back with stones must be in hiding. Also the hiding place must be close ; he would go down and teach the saucy one a lesson. He descended the ladder ; which was what Asaf Khan had desired and hoped for when he angered the man.

As the man pushed open the village gate, one sprang upon him. His arms were seized in a grip of iron, he was cast violently to the ground his face to the earth ; and ere he could raise an alarm, he was gagged. Then, despite his struggles, he was securely bound, lifted high in the air as he had been but a child, and carried to the top of the tower.

Throwing the man to the ground, Asaf Khan drew his great Afghan knife, and removed the gag from the man's mouth.

“ Utter a sound,” he said harshly, “ and that moment shalt thou die ! ”

In truth the man was a coward. One call would have alarmed the village ; but he shook his head and pressed his lips hard to signify that he was dumb.

Asaf Khan smiled scornfully upon the man, for the young judge harshly ; and he kicked the man with his foot.

“ Answer my questions,” he said ; “ but answer in a low voice. How many watchmen be there in charge of this gate ? ”

“ Three there be, brave stranger,” answered the watchman hastily, for he liked not the look in Asaf Khan's eye ; “ but one hath gone to another village to

be married, and the other is sick. Till to-morrow mid-day will no one come to the tower if I answer the call."

"H'm. Thou shalt answer the call with my knife at thy side. What is the name of thy Khan?"

"Khan Mirza Ali Mahomed Daud Khan," was the reply; "but we call him Daud Khan the fat when he is not nigh. Spare my life, brave stranger; and when thy friends come I will even show them the houses in which most wealth lies hid."

Then was Asaf Khan exceeding wroth. A watchman who spoke thus! In his wrath he smote the man upon the mouth, so that his lips were cut and the blood ran down on his beard. And that he should be silent and not again poison the air with such words, Asaf Khan bound a cloth again over the man's mouth.

But who would answer the call? He again removed the cloth from the man's mouth; but swore that if the man spoke again, that moment he should die. Also he asked the man no more questions.

And after the man had answered the first call, Asaf Khan, knowing that all was well for a time, gagged the man; and going without the village brought in his horse and tethered it at the foot of the tower, giving it grass, of which he found a bundle in a small room below.

So they sat till dawn. When the call was given the watchman answered; and because the point of Asaf Khan's knife pricked his ribs even while he called, he answered faithfully.

The storm came and went, sudden and short as are storms at that time of the year; and when the sky was golden with the rising sun, Asaf Khan gagged the man and descended from the tower.

First he sought a room near by, and finding one,

led his horse therein that it might not be seen by men who passed. A strange horse tethered at the foot of the watchtower would cause men to wonder. They might call to the watchman, and Asaf Khan would not be there to undo the gag and with his knife make him answer aright, for it was in the mind of Asaf Khan to enter the village.

Few people walked thus early ; but presently Asaf Khan met one who went on a journey and therefore rose betimes. The man started back at the sight of a stranger in the village at that hour ; but Asaf Khan bade him have no fear.

“ I come in peace,” he said. “ Lead me to thy Khan, Khan Mirza Ali Mahomed Daud Khan. I have that to tell him which must be told at once.”

“ At this hour he will be abed,” objected the man.

“ He will rise when he hears that I have come,” replied Asaf Khan confidently.

Asaf Khan’s air of command overawed the man ; and in silence he led the way through the village to the house, or rather fort, where dwelt the Khan.

But here the man at the gate would not admit them ; nor would he take a message inside till Asaf Khan threatened to hammer at the gate till not only all the house, but all the village besides should come to ask the meaning of the disturbance. At length, with much grumbling the man consented to take the message Asaf Khan sent.

“ Go, tell they Khan,” said Asaf Khan, “ that while he sleeps his village is in danger. When the Khan comes, I will tell him what more I have to say.”

The man departed. After a space he returned to the gate ; but he would not open it.

“The Khan himself comes,” he said with a grin, “and his wrath is great. Never does he rise till the sun is high in the heavens ; and lo ! the sun is but appearing.” He stopped, and darted aside as the sound of a hoarse, rough voice became audible to those without the gate.

The wicket was thrown open and a red face thrust forth. It was the Khan.

“Who disturbs my rest at this unseemly hour ? ” he demanded roughly ; and he scowled at those without.

Asaf Khan stepped forward a pace. “I do,” he said.

The Khan looked him up and down. “Thou art a stranger ? ”

“I am.”

“What is thy message ? ”

“Thy village is in danger.”

The Khan’s red face became purple. “Fool ! ” he shouted, “to disturb me with this child’s tale ! How can the village be in danger seeing I am here ! What other message dost thou bear ? ”

Asaf Khan bit his lip to hide the rage that boiled within him.

“Thy village is in danger,” he repeated, “for one of thy watchmen is a traitor.”

The Khan forced himself through the wicket. He was a burly man, and the wicket was narrow ; but he got through, and stood before Asaf Khan. “Show me this traitor ! ”

Without a word turned Asaf Khan, and with swift strides led the way to the tower. He had opened the village gate before leaving, and though some who passed called greetings to the watchman as they went

by, none went to see why he answered not. All night had he watched while they slept ; now the day had come, he rested.

The watchman was lying bound as Asaf Khan had left him ; but when he saw the Khan he struggled into a sitting position and strove to speak. But Asaf Khan meant to speak first.

“ Behold ! ” he said, pointing to the watchman. “ Last night did I come to this village seeking shelter. The way was long, and it was midnight ere I reached this place. I called, but none answered ; and going to the gate of the village, I saw that it was open. Entering, I ascended into the tower, and there lay the watchman, asleep ! Before I wakened him, I bound him ; and then did this false traitor, thinking others were of my company, offer to betray to us those in the village who possessed most wealth. I bound cloths on his mouth ; and this night hath thy village been guarded by a stranger ! ”

Now, all that Asaf Khan spoke was not the truth, for he had not found the man asleep, but had overcome him by a trick ; but the rest, that the watchman had offered to betray to him the richer men of the village, was true ; and therefore was the watchman a traitor deserving of any fate. Also a watchman should consider his life as naught to the safety of the village he guards, and this watchman could have called when Asaf Khan first removed the cloth from his mouth ; therefore was he doubly a traitor.

Khan Mirza Ali Mahomed Daud Khan was a man hasty in his anger. Always did he act first and think afterwards. With a mighty blow of his sword he struck off the watchman's head at the neck. The body

fell forward, and the Khan had to step back from the blood which poured forth.

The men who had accompanied Asaf Khan and the Khan to the tower drew back in fear, for the fury of the Khan was known to all. Blind was this fury ; and oftentimes with the guilty one had suffered others who had done no wrong. But Asaf Khan feared no Khan, much less this fat man ; he had sheltered for the night, both he and his horse, and he would begone. That the Khan was wroth troubled him not at all. He moved to leave the tower ; but the Khan seized him by the sleeve and turned upon him eyes that were red, and glared with a fierce light.

“ Who art thou ? ”

“ I am a traveller who passes this way.”

“ It is not enough ! Whence comest thou ? Whither goest thou ? ”

Now, it was not in Asaf Khan to allow any man to question him thus ; with a look of disdain he turned and left the tower.

Bellowing with rage the Khan followed him down the steps ; and bursting out of the door, aimed a blow at Asaf Khan that would surely have cut him in half. But Asaf Khan stepped aside, and seizing the wrist of the Khan, wrested the sword from his grasp. The others fled from the scene, not knowing upon whom the Khan's fury might next turn, and the two stood alone.

For a moment the Khan glared in speechless rage at this man who defied him thus, this man whose beard was of but a few years' growth ; and then he sprang. But the days of youth and activity were past. He was now grown stout, and his limbs were stiff. Asaf Khan

moved swiftly aside, seized the infuriated man by the shoulder, and cast him heavily to the earth.

The Khan rose ; and for a moment gazed in silence at the one who had served him thus. But though he was prone to anger, the Khan was a brave man, and knew a man when he saw one. This before him was a very man, and the red left his eyes.

“ Of a truth thy grasp is of iron ! ” he said rubbing his shoulder ruefully ; “ but thou didst anger me.”

“ Thou didst anger me,” retorted Asaf Khan.

The Khan chuckled at this reply, and the last of his anger left him.

“ I would know more of thee,” he said cordially. “ If thy business be not pressing, dwell here with me a space. Thou art a man after mine own heart. In the days of my youth were many men such as thou, but now they are few.”

It mattered little to Asaf Khan whither he went or where he stayed ; he but travelled to see the world without his village—and also because his father pressed him to wed. As well stay here a few days ; and to the wonder of those who had fled, and who now stood behind their closed doors peeping through cracks in the wood, Asaf Khan and Khan Mirza Ali Mahomed Daud Khan walked in friendship down the village street and to the house of the Khan.

The house was not large ; but it was strong, as any house must be in those parts if those who dwelt therein would live long. Of two storeys was the house, in the upper storey the zenana apartments and the rooms of the Khan. A small courtyard stood before, that in which were the gate, and the wicket through which the Khan had squeezed ; and on this side were windows in

the lower storey, and a door. Behind and on the two sides were neither doors nor windows in the lower storey. Only in the upper storey were there windows; for these were high and could not be entered from without, and below the windows at the back was a narrow balcony.

In the house of Khan Mirza Ali Mahomed Daud Khan alias Daud Khan the fat, Asaf Khan spent many pleasant hours ; for, save that he was easily angered, the Khan was a pleasant companion, and the life to Asaf Khan's liking. Each day they went hawking to the valley below, or across the hills ; returning at mid-day with much spoil. After the mid-day meal they told tales or played chess till the evening.

But after a space Asaf Khan tired of this life, pleasant though it was. More than once he would have left and gone on his way ; but always the Khan pressed him to stay a few days longer. All would have been well, and Asaf Khan would have departed on his way in peace had it not been for a woman. The Khan's wife saw him one day from her lattice as he rode forth to the chase.

Now, this wife of the Khan was a young wife whom he had married a few years back so that he might have sons to replace his two sons who had died in a raid which the Khan had led against another village ; a raid in which the Khan fared ill, returning childless, a man with but half his force—and no plunder ! But three years had now passed, and the young wife had borne him no son ; therefore did the Khan neglect her, and was minded to put her away and take to himself another wife.

But of these things Asaf Khan knew naught ; for

not even to his closest friend may a man speak of the women of his House ; and when he passed one evening beneath the balcony and a spray of yasmin (Persian lilac) fell at his feet, Asaf Khan thought it had fallen by chance. But because he ever liked the scent of flowers, he picked it up and smelled of it as he went on his way.

Always Asaf Khan loved to watch the sunset. In it he saw the fire of battle, the red of blood. And it was as he stood the same evening outside the courtyard wall, watching the glow of the sunset in the western sky, that there came an old woman behind and plucked his sleeve.

To Asaf Khan had many messages been delivered in this way. He turned not round, making as though he knew not of the old woman behind. She was now gathering herbs ; and presently she spoke, though she looked not up from her task.

“ Sweet is the scent of the yasmin ; but sweeter the breath of her who dropped it.”

“ I have eaten salt with the Khan,” replied Asaf Khan.

“ Round as the moon is her face,” pursued the old woman. “ Fair as the snow on the mountains is her brow, her cheeks have the tint that is found only in the heart of the rose. Two pillars of alabaster are her breasts, and her lips are twin pomegranate blossoms.”

“ I have eaten salt with the Khan.”

The old woman made a grimace behind his back. What man thought of salt when love called ! This would be a cold lover ; and she returned to her mistress.

Bitterly and with harsh words did her mistress upbraid her. Had age dulled her wits ? To think such a man as Asaf Khan, for she had learnt his name

and much about him, would be a cold lover ! And truth was a small matter when it came in the way of love. And so she scolded, till the old woman consented to do her will.

But for many days the old woman sought speech in vain with Asaf Khan. He feared to be tempted, so never stood apart from others ; and though the old woman often passed him, and with a glance told him she bore a message, no heed did he take. Daily the love in the breast of the Khan's wife burnt fiercer, for daily she saw Asaf Khan ride out and return. Daily did she upbraid the old woman for not bringing Asaf Khan the first day, threatening to have her slain ; and at last the old woman found a way.

Meeting Asaf Khan and the Khan as they returned one day from the chase, she began to wail and cast dust upon her head. A man had dishonoured her House, and she claimed the aid of the Khan, she being in his service. In her daughter's house in the village dwelt a guest, a woman friend from another village. The husband of her daughter had a friend, and this man had eaten salt in their house ; nevertheless he had sought the love of her daughter's friend and had gained it.

The Khan shook his head.

" Naught can I do in this matter," he said. " The man ate salt in the house ; but the woman was not of thy House, she was a guest. Send the woman back to her home, and let her people deal with the man."

Though the Khan thought the old woman indeed spoke of her own House, Asaf Khan knew otherwise. It was of the Khan's house she spoke. The one who had let fall the yasmin at his feet was not of the Khan's House ; she was a visitor, and the bond of salt was

naught in her case. The Khan himself had just said it. That evening Asaf Khan lingered without the courtyard to watch the sunset.

To him came the old woman, and as she gathered herbs, told him it was even as he thought. The woman was not of the Khan's house. If he would be in the same place the following evening she would lead him to paradise ; now she must go within to tell her mistress the glad news. As she passed, she slipped into Asaf Khan's hand a gold ring.

Above all love gifts did Asaf Khan value a ring. Flowers fade and die ; rich clothes are troublesome to carry, yet can they not be made into clothes in that place lest the pattern be seen and known ; but a ring slips on the finger or into the pocket of the belt, and can be sold at the first large city. And the first ring was not always the last. Often a woman gave one ring for Asaf Khan to come, who gave a dozen to have him stay when he would be gone.

The next evening came the old woman to Asaf Khan, and bade him be below the balcony that night ; and though she said no more, Asaf Khan was at the appointed spot, for he knew what would follow.

A sigh floated down from above ; and looking up, Asaf Khan saw a face smiling down upon him. The face was withdrawn, and presently a rope ladder dropped softly.

Asaf Khan was no laggard in love. Swiftly he ascended the ladder, hoping with all his heart he would not find the fair one ill-favoured, as had more than once been his lot, and stepped on to the balcony. No one was there ; but a sigh guided him to an open window, and he entered.

Then was Asaf Khan willing to stay as long as the Khan wished. In the forenoon he hawked with the Khan, or rode over the hills with him ; in the afternoon he talked with the Khan or played chess with him ; in the night he ascended the rope ladder to the balcony of the Khan's wife, though that she was aught to the Khan he knew not.

Now, as it often is, in the house of the Khan was an enemy of the wife of the Khan. A woman she was who had carried messages for the first wife of the Khan ; and she was angered that this new wife should choose another woman to carry her love messages. And so one day, meeting the Khan alone, she told him how his House was dishonoured.

Never had been the Khan's face as red as it became that day. So great was his rage, that for a space he could neither speak nor move. Suddenly he seized the woman by her hair, and beat her head upon the ground till she lay senseless before him. And now he would have gone to the room of his guilty wife and have slain her ; but at the foot of the stairs he paused.

It was not like the Khan to pause thus in his wrath ; but some of his wrath had passed when he beat the woman senseless. Also the steps were steep, and he was fat. To burst into his wife's room panting and gasping for breath would excite mirth rather than terror ; moreover, should his wife run to other rooms, he would not have the breath to pursue.

And did the woman indeed speak the truth ? Much had he talked with Asaf Khan, and he could not believe that Asaf Khan would do this thing. To break bread with a man, to eat salt with him, and then to dishonour his House ! It could not be. But love

makes strange changes in a man. Calling to him his two brothers and their sons, who dwelt in the same village but in another house, he told them what he had heard from the woman.

These men also knew Asaf Khan ; and though he treated them with scanty courtesy, and not as should be treated the relations of the Khan, even they agreed that it was not in Asaf Khan to do this thing. The woman must have a grudge against her husband, and therefore had she told this tale.

But the Khan would make sure ; and he bade his brothers come to him again after dark. The woman had said Asaf Khan climbed the balcony each night without fail ; they would go to Asaf Khan's room, and if he be not found therein, then would they go to the room of the Khan's wife and take the false traitors in their sin.

And so it came to pass that after Asaf Khan had climbed the ladder that night, one of the young men who had watched from afar went and told the Khan it was even as the woman had said. A man had climbed to his wife's balcony, and the form was the form of Asaf Khan. Then went the Khan and his brethren to the room of Asaf Khan, and Asaf Khan was not.

Great was the fury of the Khan, and he swore by his beard and the beard of the Holy Prophet, that with his own hand he would slay this Asaf Khan ; and bidding his brethren go softly up the staircase and break open the door of his wife's room, he went to the foot of the ladder. By that way would Asaf Khan seek to escape, and he would slay him.

Now, it chanced that the old woman was about to descend the stairs, when she saw the men talking below.

Their presence there at that hour could have but one meaning, all was discovered ! Running to the door of her mistress's chamber, she scratched upon it till it was opened to her.

Then did the wife of the Khan fear greatly, and repent her of the evil she had done ; but Asaf Khan, knowing not the whole truth, drew her to him and would have comforted her. Let the Khan come ; it would take a greater than Daud Khan the fat to harm her when Asaf Khan was by. There was no bond of salt ; when the Khan knew the truth, his anger would burn less fierce.

But the woman pushed him off ; and drawing her woman into a corner, promised her great riches if she would but think of a way to save her. Some moments they talked in whispers ; and then steps were heard on the stairs. Suddenly the two women began to scream.

“ Help ! Help ! ” they cried. “ A man has come up a rope and entered the room ! ” for thus they had decided between them to say. They would say Asaf Khan came unknown to them. Some one had told the Khan ; they would say that that one had sent the man up the rope out of enmity to the Khan's wife. The Khan would believe, and would spare his wife thinking the fault not hers. And then the old woman saw a look in Asaf Khan's eyes that she liked not at all, for Asaf Khan was angered.

“ Hasten ! ” she screamed, forgetting all except the present fear. “ Hasten, or the man will slay the wife of the Khan ! ”

Then did Asaf Khan know to the full the wickedness of this woman who had been unfaithful to her husband with one who ate that husband's salt.

At first he would have slain her for the evil she had

wrought and the shame she had brought upon his name ; but the old woman threw herself between, with many tears entreating him to spare her mistress. The Khan would believe the tale they told ; and they would say the man was a stranger. Thus would the life of her mistress be spared, and no shame come to Asaf Khan. The woman's tears prevailed, and Asaf Khan passed swiftly into the balcony, for a knocking at the door told him that the time was short.

But Asaf Khan was not one to act blindly, else had he not lived to be in this balcony. First he looked down ; and seeing the Khan at the foot of the ladder, returned to the room. Snatching a quilt from the bed, he went again into the balcony ; and throwing the quilt over his shoulder, descended the rope ladder.

The Khan awaited him below, sure of his revenge ; but while he was still out of reach, Asaf Khan paused and removed the quilt from his shoulder. With a quick movement he cast the quilt over the head of the man below, and before the Khan could remove it, Asaf Khan leaped, full upon the Khan he leaped, striking him to the ground ; and the next moment he was away.

But there was no need for haste. When the brethren of the Khan looked from the balcony, they beheld the Khan lying prostrate under the quilt, and hastened to his aid. He was sore hurt, and for a full hour knew not where he was nor who tended him. Even then he could not rise from the couch on which they had laid him ; and as none knew which way Asaf Khan had gone, nor wished much to overtake him, none followed.

By morning Asaf Khan was far away. His horse he had lost ; but he had seven rings, and with one he bought a fresh horse at the next village.

CHAPTER XII

HOW ASAF KHAN KEPT THE FORT

A GAIN it was evening, and the sun's slanting rays sought the shadows of the camel serai of Peshawar city as if still in search of the life and movement of past days. The sparrows had not returned ; but the bulbul, grown more bold, now often sat on the topmost twig of the plum tree in the corner and warbled to his mate. The dog was dead ; for dogs may not live without food, and in the serai was none. To other serais or to the streets it might not go ; for each street and serai has its dogs, who will allow no intruder in their domain. And so one night it died.

For many days the serai knew not Asaf Khan. Shame filled his heart as he thought of his failure what time he went to Jelalabad ; and none in Peshawar knew where he dwelt, not even his friend Colonel Markham, who had returned from Gilgit.

But time heals all wounds, even those of sorrow and pride ; and it came to pass that Asaf Khan sat again without the door of his room in the camel serai of Peshawar city.

That it should still be deserted he could understand. Caravans had not come for many days, and many days must pass ere caravans again came down the Khyber ;

for men's minds were still disturbed by this great war the white races had been waging among themselves. The war was now over, but still men feared to leave their homes. Men had suffered much in this war, men who had taken no part in it, who belonged not to the nations that warred. Many had been driven from their homes ; others had seen their all destroyed, and now wandered in search of food. The land was full of those who wanted and would not hesitate to take if occasion offered, and a man who still had a home of his own was safest there.

Even Hindustan had caught the prevailing madness. Was it not in all men's mouths but a few weeks back that the people of Hindustan had risen, and the English were all driven out of the country or killed ! At first Asaf Khan would not believe. Too many tales had already come from that land of falsehood and intrigue ; from that land where men would always that others fought their battles and bore the burden, while they lay secure and filched from those who saved them. But at last he learnt that in part it was indeed so ; that in the Punjab the people had risen and attacked the English in many places. Not the armed men, it is dangerous work meddling with armed men ; but six unarmed Englishmen had they killed in Amritsar, one Englishman had they beaten as they thought to death, and four Englishmen had they killed in Kasur.

In other places would they have killed also ; but now the English were on their guard and were gathered together in centres with guns in their hands. For a crowd to attack and slay a man, unarmed and alone, is safe ; but to attack men prepared, men with guns in their hands, is not safe. Therefore were there no more English killed at that time.

But still men talked. Crowds assembled daily in many places, threatening always that they would presently show the English their strength. Daily was the railway line cut in fresh places and the telegraph wires cut. Railway stations were burnt, and ever the excitement burst forth in new places as the weakness of the English seemed more apparent.

Asaf Khan cursed the English for fools. Had they no sense? Would they let this thing go on till the blood of thousands must be shed ere order be once more restored? Let him but have the ordering of affairs for one short week, and there would be no more unrest in Hindustan. He smiled grimly as he thought of the measures he would take.

At last the English moved. Troops were sent out into the district, the roads and railways were patrolled, and all gatherings outside the great cities of Lahore and Amritsar were forbidden. Proclamation was made throughout the streets of each city, warning all men that, as they defied the law, and the police no longer sufficed to keep the peace, any gathering in defiance of this order would be fired on by the troops.

But the day was past for orders and proclamations to have effect. Even as the man with the drum walked through the streets of Amritsar city calling the order, another walked through other streets announcing a meeting to be held in a garden without the city.

With boasting and with many threats was this meeting held. Fools got up and talked; cowards who urged other and simpler men to brave what they dared not themselves. Poems were recited, and every means in the power of these enemies of the English were used to excite the people to defy their rulers and destroy them.

Then, according to the order that was given came soldiers who fired on the crowd, so that many were slain and others fled in fear. Gone was their vaunted courage. Their leaders hid in secret places. Far and wide spread the news of the doings of that day, and men's hearts failed them. There was a pause, and in the pause came thought.

Why were they behaving thus? Had the English done harm to their country, or had they done it good? If they turned the English out, who would be their rulers? The men who had urged them to this evil. The men who slunk away and hid when danger was nigh. To whom would they appeal against the injustice and oppression of the Zaildar and Tehsildar (minor revenue and police officials) when there was no more an English Deputy Commissioner? To whom should they appeal against police tyranny and zulm when the Superintendent of Police was an Indian? Who would give them the justice denied them in the lower Courts when the judges of the higher Courts were perchance of the same caste and family as the opposite side? And so, after many days, men took up their abandoned work and there was peace.

To Peshawar also had the unrest spread; but in Peshawar were many troops, and the people walked circumspectly. In a few villages did the people give trouble; but these men were soon taught the error of their ways, the leaders in Peshawar were sent away from the city, and in a few days the trouble was a thing of the past.

And now came the news that the Afghans would invade Hindustan, that their troops were even now massed on the Border, in some places were across the Border. Deceived by the tales from Hindustan, the

one who was now Amir led his army to what he thought would prove an easy conquest.

That this would one day come to pass, Asaf Khan had known ; was he not in Jelalabad in the days when Amir Habibulla Khan was slain ? Not long would the soldiers be denied ; and their Amir was now one who would not deny, would rather urge them on. Another, perhaps that other of whom men had spoken in the Jelalabad bazaar was now their Amir ; and the word had gone forth that Hindustan was to be conquered again from the north.

Then to Asaf Khan came one sent by the Wise One. Again the gorgeous hues of scarlet and gold were seen at the gates of the serai ; but this one came not in. Calling his message from the gate, he fled ; nor did he cease running till he reached the bridge where the road passes under the railway line. Thence did he make his way to the bungalow of the Wise One and said that Asaf Khan had promised to come on the morrow, which was a lie. But had he waited for an answer, he might have got a pitcher of sour milk with it ; and therefore did this Gorgeous One think it best to tell a lie.

Though Asaf Khan had sent no message, he went to the bungalow of the Wise One next day, where the Wise One awaited him in his office. Taking the proffered chair, Asaf Khan seated himself and stared at the Englishman in silence, willing the other to speak first. Naught said Asaf Khan ; the Wise One said naught ; and thus they gazed at each other for a space.

Presently the Wise One smiled gravely. He knew why Asaf Khan spoke not.

“What is past, is past,” he said ; “yet, had’st thou come, the land and house had been thine.”

“ I earned it not,” said Asaf Khan curtly. “ What would'st thou of me ? ”

“ A message. A message to one afar. By word of mouth must this message be delivered, and the one who takes the message carries his life in his hand.”

“ To what place must this message be taken ? ”

“ To Kaum, a small fort, a military post beyond Thall.”

Asaf Khan pursed up his lips. “ The Afghans come that way.”

“ It is so. Those in the fort know it not ; therefore would I warn them. There be two English officers, five Sikh sowars (cavalrymen) and the Levies. The Levies will not fight for us, they will prove unfaithful to their salt; I would warn the others to retire while there is yet time.”

Asaf Khan had heard of this matter of the Levies, the men of the Border enrolled and armed by the English to keep peace on the Border ; and his heart was filled with shame that this vile thing should be. Men of the Border unfaithful to the bond of salt ! Never had such a thing been before ! But their minds had been poisoned by the new teaching, that the eating of salt was not binding as between the Faithful and those not of the Faith.

And this mission to a place beyond Thall was not to his liking. Also he was sore at the failure of his last mission. He answered harshly that he had eaten no salt of the English and would not go.

“ Thou shalt go,” said the Wise One confidently, “ and this is the message thou shalt bear. The Englishmen and the Sikhs must take horse at once and ride from Kaum. They must warn those in the other posts, and all will retire together. As much ammunition

as they can they must destroy before they leave, and this they must do in each place. This message shalt thou bear to Kaum. Go now, for the time is short."

"I will not go," repeated Asaf Khan. "This is no quarrel of mine. I have said before, I will fight only the men of the Border who are mine own enemies; others I will not fight. They are of my race and blood. If I take this message, I will surely have to shed blood either going or coming; and the blood of men of my race I will not shed save in mine own quarrel."

"Thou shalt go; for," the Wise One raised his hand as Asaf Khan was about to interrupt, "for one of the Englishmen in Kaum is Colonel Markham."

Asaf Khan rose to his feet. "I go," he said. "Send thou a man to lock the door of my room in the serai," and he strode from the room.

Two ways lead to Thall, one by the railway through Campbellpore and Kohat, the other straight across. The first is the longer way, but in time of peace it is the quicker. Now few trains ran, and it might prove the longer in time as in distance; Asaf Khan went direct.

He was a man inured to hardship; buying a little food as he passed through the bazaar, he turned his steps in the direction of Kohat.

Many perils had he by the way, for the whole Border was ablaze. At one place he had to lie hid for an hour while a party passed back from a raid into British territory. Cattle they had with them, and captives whom they would hold to ransom; and coming to a smooth stretch of grass, they rested for a space. Close between two rocks, barely hidden by a bush that grew upon them, Asaf Khan lay, scarce daring to breathe till they had rested and gone their way.

Kohat he passed the next morning; and now came

the part of his journey where it behoved him to take every care if he would win through and not be slain ere his message be delivered.

Beyond Kohat he rested till even, eating sparingly of the food he had brought ; and when the sun was low in the west, he again set out. Night drew on, and now he stepped warily ; for if he be but seen or heard it would go hard with him. A stranger unable to account for his presence, he would be taken for a spy and would receive short shrift from whomever he met. Parties were out he knew, not small parties, but gangs of fifty and a hundred ; to be discovered by one of these would spell failure and death.

Swiftly he moved through the darkness, swiftly yet cautiously, his ears alert to catch the slightest sound, his eyes peering into the darkness. For many miles he walked thus, hearing and seeing naught ; and then he came to a great plain. Upon this plain was the post to which he must take his message ; and he gave thanks to Allah that his task was done. In a few hours he would be in Kaum, his message delivered, and by evening the defenders would be safe on their way to Hindustan.

But it is not safe to say beforehand what will be, lest the fates be angered and say it shall not be ; and thus it was with Asaf Khan.

The first grey streaks of dawn were creeping up in the sky, when he marked on the edge of the plain a dark mass moving towards him. In an instant he dropped between two rocks. Swift was his movement, swift as the fall of the falcon on its way, but not swift enough to escape the keen eye of the Pathan raider. A shout ; a sound of running feet ; and he knew he had been seen.

In an instant he was up and away across the broken ground. Those who followed fired as they ran ; but the aim of a running man is bad and the light was dim ; the bullets flew wide and he sped on unharmed. That he could outdistance his pursuers he doubted not ; but to save himself was not all he must do. His message must be delivered. Perchance these were the men who would presently attack the fort.

One consolation he had. They would not attack the fort by day. In the dark they would attack, and he must find a way to cross the plain and deliver his message before nightfall. His crafty brain worked busily as he ran.

Neither away from the plain did he run, nor across it ; but on the edge did he run, for so he would run over broken ground where the pursuers would be hampered, and at the same time he would never be far from the fort. It might be that a chance would offer for a dash across the plain ; though for this he hardly hoped, and a glance behind showed him that had he hoped, the hope would have been in vain. While some followed, others kept between him and the fort ; though whether they did so to keep him from running that way, or whether they went to some appointed spot, he knew not.

On he ran, and ever the others were farther behind ; but he could not run thus all day. He could run for an hour, he could run for two ; but he could not run till nightfall. Also day was breaking, and others might see him and take up the chase, others fresh and unwearied. He must hide ; but where ?

Into every bush he peered as he passed it, round every rock ; but for long he could see no shelter. He had passed over a ridge and was now out of view of his

pursuers ; could he find a refuge now, he could enter it unseen. The ground was much broken, and many rocks thrust their sharp edges from the earth ; but always round their bases and between them was solid ground. A jackal's hole, a cleft between two rocks would serve his need ; but though jackals had howled throughout the night, and many of the rocks were shattered, he found nor hole nor cleft deep enough to hide him.

He mounted another rise ; and now, though he could see far behind, he saw no man. The pursuers had given up the chase and he was safe ; he could take his message to the fort. He threw himself down to rest.

It was little rest his iron frame needed, and within a few minutes he was again upon his way. Direct to the fort he must not go, for those who so lately had pursued him would see and would cut him off. Further along the edge of the plain must he go ere he could cross it.

And now he began to recognize some of the hills he saw in the distance. In this part of the country he had been before, and knew of an old tower that lay a mile away. From the top of the tower he could see for many miles around, and could mark the safest way to the fort. He hurried on, and presently the tower came in view. Near by there stood a house which had not been there when Asaf Khan was here before, and he prayed that no one dwelt therein. Haply in these disturbed times it would be empty, the owner fearing to dwell in such a lonely place.

Cautiously he approached. Nothing stirred without the house. Not a dog barked, the door and windows were closed ; and Asaf Khan breathed a sigh of relief. The place was deserted. He could climb the tower.

Nevertheless he beat at the door of the house, craving food and shelter in the name of Allah ; but none answered. One window there was near the ground ; but this was closed with shutters of heavy wood, and the other windows were high, as is the custom in those parts.

And now that he had made sure none dwelt within the house, Asaf Khan went to the tower. From the top he would see those who had lately pursued him, and could shape his course so as to avoid them. Also he would see if other bands lay hidden near.

The door was still strong ; though the hinges were rusted and some of the panels were cracked. Pushing open the door, Asaf Khan ascended the narrow, spiral stone staircase and presently came to the top. For these towers have no rooms. They are look-out posts, and there is naught but the spiral staircase within the solid mass. A few have a small room within, that the tower may serve as a place of refuge and defence, but in this part such towers are few, most have but the staircase.

Cautiously Asaf Khan peered through the embrasures round the top. The house lay below him ; beyond the open country. Nothing stirred on that side, no figure showed on the distant plain ; and he moved to the other side. There rose the fort on a mound in the midst of the plain he must presently cross ; and there, in the broken ground he had lately passed, lay those who had pursued him. In a hollow they lay, so that they should not be seen by those who kept watch at the fort ; and Asaf Khan's brows met in a frown as he marked their numbers.

Full one thousand men lay hid in the hollow ; and in the fort were two Englishmen and five Sikhs. There were men of the Levies ; but better had they not been

there, for they were traitors. Perchance even now one from the fort mingled with the band below, betraying to them the weak places of the fort. His way then was clear. He had but to go a short distance beyond the house, and he could then cross the plain in safety.

“Asaf Khan ! O Asaf Khan ! One waits here who hath sought thee long.”

Then was the soul of Asaf Khan filled with dread and his liver turned to water ; for he knew it was a spirit that called. None were near this tower save himself, and yet a voice called ! A female voice, and all men know that of all evil spirits the female spirit is the most evil. He clutched the charm at his neck. The hair on his scalp rose, and he crouched low. Men he feared not ; but an evil spirit was a thing accursed.

“O Asaf Khan !” came again in a long-drawn wail. “Wilt thou not look again upon thine own true love ? Long have I waited for this day.”

And now was Asaf Khan torn between two minds. The spirit was that of a woman ; could it be the soul of his dear, dead love ? But evil spirits take many shapes when they tempt men. If he lost his life, he lost what he valued little and gained a greater bliss ; but to lose his immortal soul— !

“Begone ! foul fiend !” he shouted hoarsely. “Know that round my neck hangs a talisman given me by the Holy Mullah of Khost ; and round my arm is a potent charm given me by a Holy Pir in Hindustan.”

A burst of shrill laughter greeted his words.

“Nay, but I am no spirit,” came the reply. “Come but to this side of the tower and look down ; thou shalt see thine own true love !”

Striding to the other side of the tower, the side on which lay the house, Asaf Khan looked down. Beneath him stood a woman, and behind her were four men. At first Asaf Khan knew not the woman, nor remembered ever having met her; but when he looked again he remembered, and knew his deadliest enemy stood below. It was the woman with whom he had left the shoe.

He frowned angrily. Little would he have recked had they met at any other time; but now his message must be delivered, and —this she fiend stood below! From her four men he feared naught. He had his knife, and doubted not he could hack a way through; but she would follow him to the fort, and great shame would be his if he arrived pursued by a shrieking woman. He could slay her; but never save once had Asaf Khan shed the blood of a woman, and he wished not to do so now. He gazed angrily down on her, and she laughed back.

Then did Asaf Khan learn the peril in which he stood, and the lengths to which a woman will go in her lust for revenge.

The woman and her men had been to Thall to purchase cloths from Hindustan, and on their return they travelled by night as being the safer. And it chanced that their path crossed the path of Asaf Khan. The woman and three of her men had passed before Asaf Khan came; but the fourth had stayed behind to mend a broken sandal strap, and seeing a stranger approach, he hid. Recognizing Asaf Khan, for all men of the House of this woman had sworn never to forget the face of the man who had put shame upon her, he hastened to his mistress when Asaf Khan had passed, and told her the news.

The woman's eyes sparkled with fierce joy Her

enemy was near, alone ; and she cast about in her mind how she might best get him into her power. But first she commanded her man to follow swiftly, while she followed more slowly with the other three.

For many miles was this man behind Asaf Khan, though Asaf Khan knew it not ; but the night was dark, the way rough, and the man had to walk cautiously for Asaf Khan oft looked behind. And so it came to pass that the man lost Asaf Khan in the darkness.

Then was the woman wroth with her man, and upbraided him with bitter words, saying that he valued her honour not at all in that he had let this man escape. Naught answered the man. Words of reason are wasted on a woman when she is pleased ; how much more are they wasted when she is angered ! And after she had reproached him for a space, the woman turned her steps towards her home.

Now it was that the woman's way led past the house near the tower ; and as day was at hand, she and her men took refuge therein till night should again fall. And that no man should know they were in the house, they closed the door fast and made no fire, eating of the food they had with them.

And while they ate, one beat upon the door and called. Nothing answered they ; but the woman went to the window, and looking through a crack in the shutter, saw Asaf Khan.

Then did the eyes of the woman again glitter with cruel joy. Though she had lost her enemy for a time, again was he delivered into her hand. This time he should not escape. With her face pressed to the window she saw Asaf Khan enter the tower.

The woman sat silent for a space, thinking how she might destroy her enemy. Openly she dared not

attack him ; for she had with her but four men, and Asaf Khan she thought a match for ten. Sometimes she frowned, and her looks were fierce when she thought of the shoe and the shame ; and sometimes she sighed and her eyes grew soft as she thought what a very man this Asaf Khan was.

But the wrath that had burned in her heart this many years would not be denied, and at last she thought of a plan. In one of the rooms she had seen a great heap of firewood piled high to the roof ; with this would she take her revenge upon the scorner. Calling to her men, she disclosed her plan.

At first they would not ; for they also were brave, and there are some things a brave man will not ; but the woman prevailed, and presently the men did her will.

Then called she to Asaf Khan as he stood on the tower looking across to the fort ; and she mocked him, telling what she had done. All the firewood had she and her men piled in the passage and the door of the tower, mixing with it straw she had also found in the house. Even now one of the men was putting fire to the heap, and presently Asaf Khan would die, choked by the smoke that came up the staircase, for much of the wood was yet green.

Asaf Khan gnashed his teeth with rage. He, a warrior noted far and wide for his craft, to be trapped and slain thus by a woman ! And to die like a hornet that is smoked in its hole in the wall where it has made its nest.

He started towards the staircase ; but even as he did so a cloud of smoke came forth and drove him back to the edge.

The woman laughed when she saw him again.

“ Once I almost worshipped thee, O Asaf Khan ! ”

she cried. " Now I worship thee indeed. I offer incense to thee even as the infidels offer incense to their gods ! "

The smoke was in Asaf Khan's throat, and he answered her hoarsely.

" Black shall be thy face in Paradise, thou childless woman ; but Asaf Khan fears not death, for to him shall be a place of honour ! "

The woman laughed shrilly.

" Bihist is not for thee, O Asaf Khan ; for to-morrow when the fire shall have died down, I and my men will come up and burn thy body to ashes ! How then shalt thou rise again on the Last Day, having nor body nor bones, thy ashes cast to the four winds of the heavens ! "

Then was Asaf Khan filled with rage as never before in his life. And he foamed at the mouth as he called down the curse of Allah and His Holy Prophet on this woman who would treat a man thus. But the woman smiled, showing the beautiful teeth Asaf Khan had once praised.

Asaf Khan drew back from the edge. He would not that he should die with this woman's gaze upon him, and die soon he must. The smoke came forth in ever increasing volume, and as there was no breeze to blow it aside it rose straight in the air ; but before rising, it spread about the top, so that presently there would be no place where Asaf Khan might breathe, and he would choke. Had the tower been lower, he would have cast himself down upon the woman and in dying slain her ; but the tower was high, she would see him coming and would move aside.

Now was the smoke over all the top of the tower ; and Asaf Khan cast himself down on the floor, for there he might still get a little air ; and his face was

near the hole. Then was the heart of Asaf Khan glad, for he knew he would not die this shameful death at the hands of a woman.

Drawn up by the heat above, a stream of air came pouring through the hole, sweet fresh air, and Asaf Khan could breathe. The tower could not burn, for it was solid stone and earth ; here would he lie till the wood burnt out and the woman and her men came up. Then it would be his turn ! From the top would he cast the men ; but the woman he would not kill. Black shame should be her portion, shame to which the shame of the shoe was honour.

And then he thought of his mission. The fire would not burn out till next day, so the woman said, and he would not be in time to warn. He gnashed his teeth in impotent fury. But not for long. He had been saved from death, might he not yet find a way to deliver his message in spite of the woman fiend below ? He called all his craft to his aid, and presently he smiled, a smile that would have given the woman thought had she seen it.

Asaf Khan had lain silent, answering not the woman when she jeered ; but now he began to call to her and revile her, coughing and choking as if the smoke were in his throat ; so that the woman was deceived, and called joyfully to ask how he liked this death, and when he would die.

Asaf Khan smiled grimly as he called back. And ever his voice grew more hoarse and feeble, and ever he coughed and choked more. Presently he began to call upon Allah and His Holy Prophet, and to repeat the Kalma (creed) as behoved a true Mussulman at the point of death ; and he threw his arm over the edge so that the woman could see his hand. The woman

screamed with joy when she saw the hand, for it clenched and unclenched as the hand of a man dying in agony.

Asaf Khan was now silent ; but still the hand moved. Sometimes it clenched, and sometimes it straightened and remained stiff for a space. And the woman laughed and threw stones at the hand, so that the men moved from that place lest they be hit, for the aim of a woman is known to all men.

And as the woman gazed and laughed and threw stones, the hand stiffened with a great spasm, the fingers working as if they sought to grasp the air. Then the fingers grew slack, the hand grew limp, the arm slipped from the edge, and the woman knew that her enemy was dead. She ceased to throw stones, and her men drew dear.

Stranger than all other things in Heaven or on Earth is the heart of a woman. For a space the woman stood silent, and then she shrieked. Dreadfully she shrieked, so that her men shuddered at the sound and gazed at her in amazement. Seizing her hair in her hands, she tore it out in handfuls, while scream after scream burst from lips that were livid as the lips of the dead. And as the men gazed in wonder, the woman turned to them a face of horror and despair.

“ He is dead ! ” she screamed in a terrible voice. “ Asaf Khan is dead ; and I have slain him ! But there may yet be time to save ! ” and rushing to the open door she strove with her naked hands to tear out the fire that burnt fiercely within. Seizing the burning brands, she hurled them forth ; but the fierce flames drove her back again and again, her hands burnt and charred, her clothes on fire. Her men seized her and

strove to bear her away ; but she fought with them ; scratching their faces till the blood ran down, tearing the hairs from the beards, and biting to the bone, till they were fain to release her and let her have her will.

Again she rushed to the door ; but this time a measure of reason had returned, and she saw the hopelessness of that she would have done. Asaf Khan was doomed, was dead, and naught that she could do would bring him again to life. Again the woman screamed ; and running to the side where she had seen the arm, held her maimed hands to the heavens.

“ Asaf Khan ! ” she cried ; and the men shuddering stopped their ears at the sound. “ Asaf Khan ! Beloved ! Forgive ! ”

For a moment she stood with upraised arms ; then running to the door, she cast herself headlong into the furnace that raged within.

Then did her men flee in terror from that awful place.

Hearing all, Asaf Khan raised his head from the hole for a moment, and through the smoke saw the men fleeing from the spot. He was saved ; but what of his message ? He looked around.

The smoke was less, in time it would cease ; but the fire would continue to burn for many hours. He looked over the side. He had but his turban to lower himself with, and that was far too short ; but what other way was there ? Could he fight his way down the passage and through the fire to the door ? There was no other way, and his message must be delivered soon. He could do nothing till the smoke ceased, and he lay praying silently to Allah that he might yet be in time to save his friend.

At last the smoke ceased to rise, and Asaf Khan approached the opening. It was even as the mouth

of a furnace ; and Asaf Khan's face grew stern as he thought of what he must suffer ere he won through. For win through he would, else his message would not be delivered, and his friend would die.

Another hour he waited, and then again approached the opening. The heat was not so great as before ; but still it was enough to make the bravest draw back in fear if naught but thought of self urged that one. But Asaf Khan thought not of self ; it was of another he thought. Swathing his face and neck in his turban so that only his eyes showed through the folds, he bound pieces torn from his clothes round his feet and hands. His leather coat would protect his body ; and thus prepared, he approached the opening for the third time.

It was a terrible journey. His lungs were bursting ere he reached the bottom ; and here he had to leap over and struggle through the fire, sometimes with his hands tearing down a heap over which he could not pass. The body of the woman lay near the entrance, burnt and twisted ; and Asaf Khan smiled at the sight of the foolish woman who would have destroyed her enemy, yet only destroyed herself.

With staring eyeballs he burst through the door and cast himself down, gasping for breath, and beat out the fire from his clothes. His hands were blistered and raw, his clothes scorched and burnt ; but he was safe, and would be in time with his message.

Not long did Asaf Khan rest. In spite of the cloth the skin was burnt from his hands in many places, and his legs had many burns ; and his feet had escaped, protected by the sandals and the cloth he had bound round them ; and it is with his feet that a man walks. His face too was not burned, nor his beard singed, for which he gave thanks to Allah. He could walk, the

burns on his legs could not be seen, and he could muffle his hands in his garments ; but his face and beard he could not hide. Men would ask questions ; could he say he had been served thus by a woman !

With rapid steps he hurried across the plain, though each step was an agony, and in an hour the challenge of the sentry on the wall rang out.

“ A friend,” replied Asaf Khan. “ I come to friends within from friends without.” Thus he spake, for he saw that the sentry who challenged was one of the Levies.

Those at the gate were also Levies ; for Colonel Markham knew not that the Levies would prove unfaithful to their salt, nor did he know the Afghans were near. Asaf Khan was admitted ; and mingling with the men, told them of the thousand without saying he had come on ahead to prepare them. This he did thinking that the Levies must already know of the host without ; and as he spoke, he knew it was so.

But when they spoke, he learned a new thing. These men were unfaithful, but they were not as vile as he had thought. For the English they would not fight ; they would fight against the English ; yet would they not fight against those who had been their comrades in the fort. They would stand aside till the fighting in Kaum was done, then would they join the Afghans and go up against other places. In such strange fashion does the mind of man sometimes work !

But his message must be delivered ; and Asaf Khan made his way presently to the rooms in which the English officers lived. Here he found his friend the Colonel Sahib, and to him delivered the message of the Wise One, telling him also of the thousand men that hid in the hollow. But naught did Asaf Khan say of his

journey hither ; nor did the colonel see his burnt hands, for Asaf Khan kept them hidden in his long sleeves.

Then did the colonel call to him the other English officer and the Sikh Havildar (N.C.O.) and he told them of the message Asaf Khan had brought. Long they talked over this matter of giving up the fort for it was to the liking of none, they being brave men and warriors ; but orders had come, and orders must be obeyed. No ammunition could they destroy in Kaum, nor guns ; for the Levies had spoken before Asaf Khan of these things, saying that with arms and ammunition they were sure of a warm welcome from the Afghans. The Levies would allow nothing to be destroyed ; they must leave all things in Kaum. Elsewhere it might be that the ammunition could be destroyed ; but they must hasten, for if once news of the Afghan host reached other places, it would be there as here.

The party was soon mounted, a spare horse of the colonel's being given to Asaf Khan ; and they rode out of the gate of the fort, the two Englishmen leading, Asaf Khan and the Havildar next, the other four Sikhs following.

Naught said the colonel as he passed through the gate of the fort, and naught said the Levies. They knew why he went, he had heard of their treachery from the stranger, and though they hardened their hearts, they were ashamed and would not look him in the face. The Sikhs looked neither to the right nor to the left, lest their eyes be offended with the sight of these traitors ; and the Levies, knowing their thoughts, ground their teeth with rage. Still they said naught. Presently they would follow, and these five men would they seek out for their own. Only Asaf Khan spoke.

“ I will return,” he said. “ In a little while I will return.”

At his words the Levies wondered. This man had warned the Englishmen at Kaum, now he went doubtless to warn others ; and yet he spoke of returning ! Let him return ; they would deal with him ! Or was it that he led the Englishmen into an ambush ?

Stiffly erect, as on parade, rode the small party down the slope till they reached the foot of the mound on which stood the fort ; then putting spurs to their horses, they rode away.

Hard they rode and fast they rode, nor did they spare their horses, for the time was short. Many must be warned, and much ammunition destroyed ere the Afghans came.

On they galloped, their horses' hoofs ringing clear on the hard, stony ground. Sometimes the Englishmen talked, and sometimes the Sikh sowars talked to each other ; but Asaf Khan and the Sikh Havildar spake never a word. Asaf Khan was busy with his thoughts, which were now taking shape ; and Havildar Tek Singh thought of his home in the Doab, wondering if he would ever see it again. Near the Beas river was Havildar Tek Singh's home, nestling in a grove of sheesham trees, with a mango near the door, and plum trees about the well at the back. Fields of corn he had, tilled by his hired men ; and before his door played four sons, who were yet young but who would some day wear the uniform of the Sircar even as their father did. He sighed.

Asaf Khan glanced round when he heard the sigh. Was this man soft of heart ? If so, he might not fall in with the plan that was forming in Asaf Khan's mind. But the face at which he looked grew stern

again, the lips set tight, and he knew this man for a warrior who joyed in a warrior's life, perchance would joy in a warrior's death Asaf Khan would offer him. Asaf Khan returned to his thoughts.

At mid-day they had left Kaum. Three hours' hard riding would take them to the next post. An hour after, they could leave that place for another. So much for them. The Afghans would advance on Kaum at nightfall. Finding the English gone, they would follow immediately, reinforced by the Levies of Kaum. It would take the Afghans longer to do the journey, say five hours. The English would then have a start of about eight or nine hours. Nine hours is not much. The Pathan travels fast, and the retiring force would be overtaken ere it reached a place of safety. If the Afghans could be detained at Kaum, those who retired would have a better chance of getting away.

He did not think the Afghans would advance on Kaum before night. The Levies would fear a trap, and would warn the Afghans to be on their guard. The parting words of Asaf Khan moreover would puzzle them, and to this end he had spoken. He glanced again at Havildar Tek Singh, and then at the other four Sikhs. They were all warriors, for they were of the Khalsa ; but to do what he asked of them they must be more than warriors. He turned in his saddle, and for the first time spoke to Havildar Tek Singh.

“ I am a Pathan, and thou art a Sikh. Between the Pathan and the Sikh has ever been enmity ; yet forget now that I am a Pathan, as I shall forget that thou art a Sikh, and let us be friends and brothers. Thou would'st be faithful to thy salt, for no man of the

Khalsa (Sikh community) hath ever been nimak haram, and I would be faithful to one who is more to me than a brother. Let us then be brothers till our task be done."

Havildar Tek Singh stretched forth a brawny hand, a hand that knew the feel of a sword hilt better than it knew aught else, a hand that had sent many a Border ruffian to his last account.

"Be it so ! And yet there was no need for so many words ; ride we not as brothers ? Is not our task nearly done ? "

Asaf Khan grasped the proffered hand in a clasp that made even the burly Sikh wince.

"We ride as brothers," he agreed, retaining the Havildar's hand, "but we ride in the wrong direction. Ride closer that we be not overheard," and he dropped the hand he had been holding.

The Havildar glanced at him keenly, for he understood not the words of Asaf Khan. They rode from Kaum to the next post ; how said this man that they rode in the wrong direction ? Would he have them throw in their lot with the traitors of Kaum ! He would hear further what this man had to say ; his tulwar was ready to his hand. He urged his horse closer to Asaf Khan's. The two Englishmen rode on, scanning the country before them, nor took heed of what passed behind.

Asaf Khan stroked his beard. Would this man be willing ? He was a warrior with the heart of a warrior, but was he warrior enough for this ? He lowered his voice and spoke.

"How many think you there be in the next post ? "

The Sikh shot another keen glance at the Pathan, and now the suspicion in his glance was plain to see.

Asaf Khan marked the doubt, and smiled. He raised his voice so as to reach those in front.

“Colonel Sahib, am I to be trusted?”

“To the death,” replied Colonel Markham without turning round.

“It is enough,” said the Havildar. “There be six British officers and fifty Sikhs, infantry. Levies there be; but thou sayest the Levies are pigs and traitors!” he spat contemptuously. “How many Afghans come this way?”

“A full thousand men will presently be in Kaum. When they find us gone, they will come straight on, for they will know whither we have gone.”

“But we shall have left for another post,” said the Havildar.

“On foot,” Asaf Khan reminded him. “The Sikhs in the post to which we go are foot soldiers, and there will not be spare horses to mount so many. Nor can we leave at once, for the guns and powder must be destroyed. The Afghans will be there almost as we leave; perchance before.”

The Havildar shrugged his shoulders. “We can but die. Art afraid?” he asked carelessly.

For a moment Asaf Khan’s eyes glowed dangerously; but presently he smiled.

“I am afraid,” he said, “for another. One there rides before us, even the Colonel Sahib, to whom I would that no hurt should come. Could the Afghans be stayed in Kaum but for one short hour, he would be safe.”

The Havildar shrugged his shoulders again.

“What is written must be. They cannot be stayed.”

Asaf Khan seized him by the shoulder.

“They can be stayed!” he said hoarsely. “They

must be stayed ! ” and he turned to the other four Sikhs. They had pushed their horses near, but had listened to the strange words of Asaf Khan in silence. Their Havildar would say what was needed.

“ Ye are of the Khalsa,” said Asaf Khan ; “ and the Sikhs of the other posts are also of the Khalsa, your brothers. Ever have the men of the Khalsa been faithful to their salt ; but will ye be faithful as few have ever been ? Will ye win for yourselves a name on the Border that shall endure while men have tongues to speak of these things ? ”

The fighting blood of the Sikhs answered to the call as does the willing horse to the spur. Their eyes flashed ; and each man’s hand dropped to the hilt of his tulwar.

“ How ? ” asked the Havildar curtly.

“ Thus,” and Asaf Khan dropped his voice again. “ In ten minutes shall we see the lights of the post. Let us drop further behind, and when we see the lights, let us turn our horses and gallop back to Kaum. Our horses are far spent, but they may do it ; if not, we can finish on foot. I shall call to the Colonel Sahib what we do. He knows me,”—a grim smile played about his lips—“ he knows when Asaf Khan says he will do a thing, that thing will Asaf Khan do. He cannot follow us, for his duty calls him elsewhere, to warn and to save. Even then he may not return, for he must lead those others to a place of safety. Say, will ye come ? ”

Brave were the Sikhs, brave as a man can be ; but this was almost certain death.

“ And your forefather went even to Kabul ! ” scoffed Asaf Khan. “ Ride then to safety, and in your homes tell your children how ye betrayed to death the comrades ye could have saved ! ”

The Havildar's eyes flashed fire, and he grasped the hilt of his tulwar till the muscles of his hand showed as cords

“Tell us thy plan,” he said briefly.

“It is this,” and the joy which Asaf Khan felt in his heart showed in his voice; these men would help him! “Let us to Kaum with all speed. We shall get there at nightfall, but I think before the Afghans. Then shall we steal silently into the fort where the Levies will be busy choosing what they shall take for their own, before the Afghans come. We shall be upon them ere they know of our coming; and though they are thirty, we six shall prevail. Thou hast a revolver, even as I have,” showing the butt of one hidden in his belt, “and thy men have guns. We will shoot down as many as we can, and finish with knife and tulwar. Say, will ye do this?”

The question needed no answer. Each of the Sikhs held his naked tulwar in his hand. Five pairs of eyes flashed fire. Five pairs of lips were drawn back in a snarling grin as the joy of battle raged in their hearts.

“We will do this,” said Havildar Tek Singh. “But by doing this how shall we help the others? This will not delay the Afghans.”

“Not by doing this alone shall we help the others,” replied Asaf Khan, “but by doing more.” He spoke with more confidence now, for he hoped greatly. “As I have said, so shall we do; and then will we bar the gates of the fort, placing rocks and bags of earth against them so that the enemy may not burn a way in. Then shall we defend the fort while our comrades escape to safety.”

His voice rose triumphant on the last note, and he half-turned his horse as if he would leave at once; but the Havildar placed a restraining hand upon his bridle.

“ Tell us more,” he said hoarsely. “ Till when must we defend this fort ? We are but six, and they are a thousand ; in the end the Afghans will find a way in.’

“ Till then must we defend the fort,” said Asaf Khan.

For a space there was silence ; and then again Asaf Khan spoke. What men were these ! Sometimes they would, and then again they would not ! He had hoped much of these men, but they had failed him.

“ Go back to your homes, ye men of the Khalsa ! ” he said harshly. “ Go back and tell your sons how ye were tried this night and found wanting ! ” Again his voice became urgent. “ Be ye not warriors ! Fear ye a warrior’s death ! Could any death be more glorious than this ! Think of the days that are past ! Think of your forefathers and the great deeds by which they made the Khalsa famous for all time ! Let them be proud of their sons ! How glorious to go to them with a proud face and lofty brow, worthy sons of the Khalsa of old ! ”

Almost Asaf Khan had despaired, for the Sikhs lowered their heads when he bade them go home ; but he played on the strings of their hearts as the skilled musician on the strings of the sitar, and presently they raised their heads. Then came the fire to their eyes, the flush to their faces, and at his last words they raised a mighty shout.

“ Khalsa ji ki Jai ! ” (Victory to the Khalsa !)

Hearing the shout, the English officers drew rein, and at the same moment the lights of the post came in view.

Asaf Khan and the Sikhs were a full hundred yards in the rear, and Colonel Markham waited for them to come up. To his surprise they halted ; and he heard Asaf Khan’s voice.

“ Go forward, Colonel Sahib, go and warn. Delay

not, but make all speed. As for me and these brave sons of the Khalsa, we have a mission ; we return to Kaum. Good-bye, my friend, my brother, Allah and His Holy Prophet have thee in his keeping. Good-bye !”

There was a sound of galloping, and the two Englishmen were alone.

The fight at Kaum was short and sharp. Surprised, unarmed, for they had laid aside their weapons while they sought for booty, the Levies were an easy prey. Like rabbits were they shot down as they ran for shelter, and those who escaped the bullets were slain with tulwar and knife.

Feverishly the six worked to barricade the gate ; bags they filled with earth ; great rocks they rolled and piled on the heap ; till the sweat poured down in streams did they work ; and at last the gate was safe. Only from within could the gate be now opened, and the men rested.

“It is enough,” said Asaf Khan. “Let us now place ammunition and guns in plenty round the walls. The rest of the guns will we destroy, and the ammunition we need not we will gather together in one place. When they attack we will destroy the ammunition ; but not before, lest they hear the sound and come to learn the reason. The later they come, the better for our friends.”

At nightfall the Afghans came. A few led the way, their feet muffled in cloths ; but the sharp ears of Asaf Khan heard. Approaching the gate, the men gave the signal that should have gained them admittance had the Levies still been there.

“For the Faith !”

None answered ; for those from whom they expected answer lay dead in the fort.

“For the Faith !” and one rapped loudly on the gate.

Still no answer. And then a spurt of flame leaped from the towers that flanked the gate, six spurts of flame. Six dark forms fell to the earth, for the Afghans stood close and in a body. With a yell of dismay the others fled, sped by another volley that brought three more to the ground, and Asaf Khan laughed aloud.

“Go !” he shouted. “Say that save those who came to ye by stealth in the day, none in this fort are traitors. All are faithful to their salt, and shall defend the fort while one remains alive !”

This he said, for he would the Afghans should think the Levies had changed their mind and would not betray the fort. Then would the Afghans not attack at once, and more time would be gained. With their plans gone thus astray, they would make others ere they advanced upon the fort. It was so much time gained, so much more chance for his friend to escape to safety.

An hour passed, and again his keen ear caught the sound of approaching footsteps. But two men came, and they stood afar.

“What means this treachery ?” came a voice from the darkness. “Are we not brothers ? Would ye fight against men of your own blood and Faith ? Your word was pledged that ye would open the gates ; but now, when we would enter ye slay us ! Two of your comrades are with us, and we know how few ye be ; why then do ye this foolish thing ? We will surely take this fort, for to take it we have sworn ; what then will be your fate ! Nine of us have ye slain, and two are sorely wounded ; yet shall we say naught of this if ye will open the gate.”

Asaf Khan smiled broadly. Even had they been men of the Levies, as those without thought, short shrift had been theirs at the hands of the kindred of those they had slain. He answered no word, but fired at the voice, and a yell told him his bullet had found a resting place in one of the men.

After this there was silence for the space of half an hour, and then came the attack.

In a body the Afghans rushed forward ; and though many fell, they came on till they reached the walls of the fort. But they had thought to enter by treachery, and had with them neither scaling ladders nor ropes. But some had poles on which they carried their banners ; and placing these against the wall, they strove to climb. Others mounted on each other's shoulders, and so tried to scale the wall.

All was in vain. The defenders were but six ; they might well have been a hundred. The fort was small, the whole extent of wall they had to guard not 300 yards ; drunk with the lust of battle, Khalsa and Pathan alike, they were everywhere, smiting at an arm or head, throwing back a pole with its clinging burden, firing point-blank into a face and shattering it into hideousness, here one moment, there the next, their battle cries ringing above the din, the " Khalsa ji ki Jai ! " of the Sikhs, the famous " La 'la 'la ! " of Asaf Khan.

For an hour the enemy strove ; but at the end had to retire discomfited, leaving a full two hundred of their dead lying without the fort. Three of the Sikhs were slightly wounded ; but the Afghans had little ammunition, and also feared to slay their own men who strove to climb the wall.

Then was the heart of Asaf Khan filled with a great

joy, and the sons of the Khalsa also rejoiced. The enemy would return. When they had thought of a new plan they would return, and this time they might prevail; but the first time they had been driven off with much slaughter by six men, and the fame of these six and their great deed would ring throughout the land.

Havildar Tek Singh grasped Asaf Khan by the hand.

"Much have I seen of Border fighting," he said, "and also have I been to China and Africa; but never till this day have I seen fighting such as thine! Of a truth thou art the greatest warrior this age hath seen; a very Rustom!"

Asaf Khan returned the grip cordially. These sons of the Khalsa were brave men and true warriors.

"Thou also," he replied. "All of ye fought as surely men never fought before save in the olden days. Our comrades are now safe. But," and his voice became grave, "for us this is but the beginning. The Border man and the Afghan have guile above the men of other nations. I myself have a small share of this guile," he smiled as he spoke, "and I know of what I speak. They will not attack openly this time; they——" he paused and stood in a listening attitude. "Follow me," he said curtly; and sped swiftly round the wall to the other side of the fort.

"It is the beginning of the end," he said. "What fool built this fort! Below is a place where our shots cannot reach; and there some of the enemy are hidden. Now they work at the wall. Presently, when they have mined the wall, they will blow it up and the rest will return. Hark!"

The Sikhs listened in silence, and it was even as

Asaf Khan said. Plainly on the night came the sound of digging, of iron tools striking against rock, but though they looked from many places, from nowhere could they see the men who dug. One portion of the base of the wall was not commanded from above, and the besieged were helpless.

For two hours the work continued. Often Asaf Khan thought of sallying out. But more would be lurking near to support those who dug; and in the open what chance would six have against hundreds? For two hours the work continued, and then there was a rush of scurrying feet. Asaf Khan got one, the Havildar and one of his men got one each; but the other three missed, or only wounded their men.

Now was the time to destroy the ammunition, which they had collected and piled in a great heap in an open place. Loose powder was scattered over the heap, and above all were piled great logs of wood, the whole saturated with oil. A trail of powder led from the heap, and putting a match to the end of the train, Asaf Khan and the Sikhs took shelter on the opposite side of the fort behind the officers' quarters.

For a few minutes it was as if a battle raged. Shells exploded, cartridges burst in thousands, and in the midst of the turmoil there came a deafening crash that shook the fort to its foundations. The Afghans had exploded the mine, and the wall was down.

Asaf Khan's face was grave as he looked at the havoc wrought in the wall. Full sixteen feet had fallen, and there were but six men to defend the gap. He looked around. Opposite the breach stood the guard-house, a solid structure of stone; it was there they must make their last stand. They would be

under cover, and could slay many ere they were themselves slain. The Havildar was of the same mind ; and collecting all the ammunition and guns they had not destroyed, the six entered the guard-house.

It had but two windows, high in the wall ; and from these they had nothing to fear, for they were barred with iron bars set close. One door was in front, and another behind ; and this second door the defenders made haste to secure, piling it with tables and chairs that lay in the guard-house.

Barely was their task completed, when the man at the door gave warning of the approach of the Afghans. The others posted themselves on both sides of the door, some standing, some kneeling, and some lying down, and prepared to receive the enemy.

With a rush came the Afghans ; and though the fire of the defenders was fast and furious and many an Afghan brave bit the dust, the guns were too few, and the great host poured through the breach in the wall as water pours through a broken bund when rain falls on the mountains and the river is high.

Now were the Afghans raging about the guard-house, climbing on each other's backs to reach the windows, only to leap down with curses when they found the bars. Others stood by the side of the door and tried to fire in by holding their guns at arms' length. But these did little harm ; and after many had been killed by those inside, who fired from the darkness, they desisted. Others again took refuge behind the edges of the breach, and from there fired into the guard-house ; and from these was the danger.

And so the battle raged. Presently one of the Sikhs threw up his arms. "Khalsa ji ki Jai !" he cried, and fell dead. Soon another sank to the

ground and lay still. Still the hot fire of the defenders kept the enemy from the door. A third Sikh fell and died, and then a fourth.

And now the Afghans brought fire which they put to the door behind ; so that it burned, and the room was full of smoke. Did they think to drive out the defenders ? Foolish thought ! The defenders were Havildar Tek Singh of the Khalsa, and Asaf Khan, Pathan, Afridi !

Fast the two fired, fast, yet carefully so that every shot told. So quick was the movement with which they changed a used magazine for a fresh that the eye could scarce follow the motion. The ground before the guard-house and at the breach was strewn with dead, but the Afghans would not be denied. Though they be slain to the last man by these devils they must take the guard-house, else would their faces be black in the eyes of all men. They were men accustomed to war, and knew from the sound that but two now remained alive in the guard-house.

And then Havildar Tek Singh sank to the ground.

“ I have fought,” he said. “ Let them not get my body. Khalsa ji ki Jai ! ” and died. So passed Havildar Tek Singh of the Khalsa.

Then was Asaf Khan alone in the guard-house ; but so furious was his fire, that still the Afghans dared not approach the door. But the door behind was now burning brightly, and the benches, and one outside caught sight of Asaf Khan by the light of the flames. Seeing that he was alone, and seeing also that he was a Pathan, the man called to Asaf Khan to come forth.

“ Thou art of the Faith,” he said ; “ and despite what thou hast done we will harm thee not. In the

guard-house are many guns and much powder, and these we would have. Come forth, then, and we will do thee no harm. We will swear by Allah, by His Holy Prophet, by the Holy Qaaba at Mecca, by what thou wilt."

Loud and long laughed Asaf Khan. His task was finished, and he had won ! Many hours were passed, and his friend was safe. Let these men now go on ; let them follow those who had left Kaum ; never would they overtake them. He had done what he had said he would do, he had saved his friend. His answer was a shot that took the man in the centre of the forehead.

Then were the hearts of the Afghans filled with rage that one man should defy them thus ; and they rushed at the door, heeding not the bullets that poured forth in an unending stream. But across the door had Asaf Khan placed a bench so that they should not enter ; and as fast as they came and strove to tear away the bench, so fast he shot them down.

Now was the doorway well-nigh blocked with bodies. The fire at the back burnt with ever increasing fury. Now the roof was alight, and the fire dropped on Asaf Khan as he stood and slew the men outside. Presently the back door fell with a crash, driven in by blows from without, and through the open doorway the Afghans could see Asaf Khan.

It was the end. Seizing two more benches, Asaf Khan threw them across the one with which he had blocked the front door. A bullet struck him, and his left arm dropped to his side. But he raised it again ; and seizing burning brands he thrust them beneath the benches and soon had the pile alight. Again he was wounded, but little he cared. The Afghans should get neither guns nor powder ; nor

would they get his body or the bodies of the brave Sikhs to work their shameful spite upon ; all would be consumed by fire.

The thought that on the last day he would have no body with which to rise, troubled him not at all. Allah saw all, and was merciful. A red splash suddenly showed on his breast, and he staggered back. But his task was not yet done. Everywhere in the guard-house he scattered the fire, and presently he stood within a circle of flame. A second splash showed upon his breast, but then the Afghans fired no more. Such courage as this they had never seen, and it filled them with awe.

Awhile Asaf Khan stood in the midst of the fire, gazing in fierce triumph at the foe he had cheated, for they now stood openly before the door, dumb with wonder.

But presently his face changed. The fierce triumph faded, giving place to a look of glad wonder and surprise. What saw Asaf Khan in that moment of victory and death ?

At first he saw naught but the open door and the enemy that stood without ; but the door faded away, and he stood in a green garden by running waters ; the songs of birds were in his ears, and the cool mountain breeze fanned his cheek.

And who was this that came down the path with graceful step ? Doubting his sight, he passed his poor, charred hands across his eyes. The vision was still there. She advanced, a smile of ineffable sweetness and love upon her face. It was she ! It was indeed she ! With an inarticulate cry of love and longing Asaf Khan threw wide his arms and again embraced his lost love.

THE END.



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Afghan (pseud)
Exploits of Asaf Khan
[Popular ed.]



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